Islam and the Sword

Don Closson provides a consideration of the role that violence has played in both historical and contemporary Islam.

On September 11, 2001 Americans found themselves confronted by an enemy they knew little about. We had suddenly lost more lives to a sneak attack than had been lost in the attack on Pearl Harbor and yet few understood the reasons for the hatred that prompted the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and part of the Pentagon. Even in the days that followed, Americans were getting mixed signals from the media and from national politicians. One voice focused on the peaceful nature of Islam, going so far as to argue that Osama bin Laden could not be a faithful Muslim and commit the acts attributed to him. Others warned that bin Laden has a considerable following in the Muslim world and that even if he was removed as a potential threat many would step in to replace him with equal or greater fervor.

Some argued that fundamentalist Muslims are no different than fundamentalist believers of any religion. The problem is not Islam, but religious belief of any type when taken too seriously. This view holds that all forms of religious belief, Christian, Jewish, or Islamic can promote terrorism. Robert Wright, a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania writes that:

> If Osama Bin Laden were a Christian, and he still wanted to destroy the World Trade Center, he would cite Jesus' rampage against the money-changers. If he didn't want to destroy the World Trade Center, he could stress the Sermon on the Mount.{1}

His view is that terrorism can be justified by any religion when people are economically depressed. He adds "there is no timeless, immutable essence of Islam, rooted in the Quran,

that condemns it to a medieval morality."{2}

This claim points to the question: Is there something inherent in Islam that makes it more likely to resort to violence than other world religions like Christianity or Buddhism? While it is important to admit that all religions and ideologies have adherents that are willing to use violence to achieve what they believe are justified ends, it does not follow that all religions and ideologies teach equally the legitimacy of violent means.

People have committed horrible atrocities in the name of Jesus Christ, from the inquisitions to the slaying of abortionists. However, it is my position that it is not possible to justify these actions from the teachings of Christ Himself. Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus teach that one should kill for the sake of the Gospel, the Kingdom of God, or to defend the honor of Jesus Himself.

What about Islam? My contention is that Islam's founder Muhammad, and the Qur'an, its holy book, condone violence as a legitimate tool for furthering Allah's goals. And that those who use violence in the name of Allah are following a tradition that began with the very birth of Islam.

Muhammad

As mentioned earlier, there are followers in most of the world's belief systems that justify the use of violence to achieve their religious or political goals. However, this says more about the sinfulness of humanity than it does about the belief system itself. It is important to look past the individual behavior of a few followers to the message and actions of the founder of each system and his or her closest disciples. In the case of Islam, this means Muhammad and the leadership of Islam after Muhammad's death.

One cannot overstate the centrality of Muhammad's example

within the religion of Islam. One of the greatest Muslim theologians, al- Ghazzali, writes of Muhammad:

> Know that the key to happiness is to follow the sunna [Muhammad's actions] and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movement and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk . . . God has said: "What the messenger has brought—accept it, and what he has prohibited—refrain from it!" (59:7). That means, you have to sit while putting on trousers, and to stand when winding a turban, and to begin with the right foot when putting on shoes.{3}

Although considered only human, one Muslim writer describes Muhammad as "[T]he best model for man in piety and perfection. He is a living proof of what man can be and of what he can accomplish in the realm of excellence and virtue. . . ."{4} So it is important to note that Muhammad believed that violence is a natural part of Islam. Many passages of the Quran, which came from Muhammad's lips support violence. Followers are told to "fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them (9:5)," and to "Fight those who believe not in God, nor the Last Day." (9:29) Muhammad also promises paradise for those who die in battle for Allah, "Those who left their homes . . . or fought or been slain,—Verily, I will blot out from them their iniquities, and admit them into Gardens with rivers flowing beneath;—A reward from the Presence of God." (3:195; cf. 2:244; 4:95)

While living in Medina, having escaped from persecution in Mecca, Muhammad supported himself and his group of followers by raiding Meccan caravans. His fame grew after a stunning defeat of a large, well-defended caravan at Badr. Muhammad was also willing to have assassinated those who merely ridiculed his prophetic claims. The list of those killed included Jews, old men and women, slaves, and a mother of five children who was killed while she slept.{5} Also, in order to violate a long-standing ban against warfare during a sacred month, he

claimed a new revelation that gave him permission to kill his enemies.{6}

Violent expediency seems to have been the guiding rule of Muhammad's ethics.

Early Islam

Muhammad's life as a prophet was a precarious one. After fleeing Mecca and establishing himself in Medina, Muhammad was constantly being tested militarily by those who considered him a religious and political threat. Although at an initial disadvantage, Muhammad wore down his opponents by raiding their caravans, seizing valuable property, taking hostages and disrupting the all-important economic trade Mecca enjoyed with the surrounding area.{7} The turning point for Muhammad and his followers seems to have come in what is known as the Battle of the Ditch or the Siege of Medina. A large Meccan force failed to take the city and destroy the new religion. Suspecting that a local Jewish tribe had plotted with the Meccans to destroy him, Muhammad had all the men of the tribe killed and the women and children sold into slavery.{8} In A.D. 630 Muhammad returned to Mecca with a large force and took it with little bloodshed. He rewarded many of its leaders financially for surrendering and within a short period of time a large number of the surrounding tribes came over to this new and powerful religious and political movement.

Muhammad continued building his following by using a combination of material enticements, his religious message, and force when necessary. With the fall of Mecca, many other tribes realized Muhammad's position as the most powerful political leader in western Arabia and sent representatives to negotiate agreements with him.

Muhammad's death in 632, just two years after his triumphant return to Mecca, thrust an important decision on the community

of believers. Should they choose one person to lead in Muhammad's place or do they separate into many communities. The decision was made to pick Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law and early supporter to assume the role of caliph or successor to Muhammad. Immediately, many who had submitted to Muhammad refused to do so to Abu Bakr. Several tribes wanted political independence, some sought to break religiously as well. The result is known as the Apostasy wars. At the end of two years of fighting to put down both religious and political threats, Abu Bakr had extended his control to include the entire Arabian Peninsula. Islam was now in position to extend its influence beyond Arabia with a large standing army of believers.

Violence and warfare seems to have dominated early Islam. Two of the first four caliphs were assassinated by internal rivals, and within the first fifty years of its existence Islam experienced two bloody civil wars. Rival tribal loyalties within and the religious struggle or jihad against the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires made the first century of Islam a bloody one.

Jihad

Historian Paul Johnson writes,

> [T]he history of Islam has essentially been a history of conquest and re-conquest. The 7th-century "breakout" of Islam from Arabia was followed by the rapid conquest of North Africa, the invasion and virtual conquest of Spain, and a thrust into France that carried the crescent to the gates of Paris.{9}

From the beginning, Muslims "saw their mission as jihad, or militant effort to combat evil and to spread Muhammad's message of monotheism and righteousness far and wide."{10} Although many Muslims in America have argued that jihad

primarily refers to a struggle or striving for personal righteousness, Bernard Lewis, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University writes that, “The more common interpretation, and that of the overwhelming majority of the classical jurists and commentators, presents jihad as armed struggle for Islam against infidels and apostates.”{11}

Although highly regulated by Islamic law, the call for every able- bodied Muslim to defend Islam began with Muhammad and has continued with the fatwas of Osama bin Laden in 1996 and 1998. Bin Laden argues that his attacks on American civilians and military personnel conform to Islamic law because America is acting as an imperialistic aggressor against Islam. He has three specific complaints: America has placed infidel troops on holy soil in Saudi Arabia; America has caused the death of over a million Iraqi children since Desert Storm; and American support for the evil Zionist nation of Israel.

Regarding the history of jihad in Islam, an ex-chief justice of Saudi Arabia has written “[A]t first ‘the fighting’ was forbidden, then it was permitted and after that it was made obligatory, . . .” Muslims are to fight against those who oppress Islam and who worship others along with Allah.{12} He adds that even though fighting is disliked by the human soul, Allah has made ready an immense reward beyond imagination for those who obey. He also quotes Islamic tradition, which says, “Paradise has one hundred grades which Allah has reserved for the Mujahidin who fight in His Cause.”{13}

Numerous passages in the Qur’an refer to Allah’s use of violence. A surah titled “The Spoils of War” states, “O Prophet! Rouse the Believers to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you . . . they will vanquish two hundred: if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the Unbelievers: for these are a people without understanding.”{14} Another says, “O ye who believe! When ye meet the Unbelievers in hostile array, never turn your backs to them. . . .”{15} It adds that those who do will find themselves in hell, a significant

incentive to fight on.

Muslims and Modernity

Islam was born in the midst of persecution and eventually conquest. Muhammad was adept at both religious and military leadership, but what about modern Islam? Do all Muslims see jihad in the light of conquest and warfare?

While it is probably safe to say that American born Muslims apply the teachings of Muhammad and Islamic traditions differently than Saudi or Iranian Muslims. The use of violence in the propagation of Islam enjoys wide support. Part of the reason is that the concept of separation of church and state is alien to Islam. Muhammad Iqbal, architect of Pakistan's split from Hindu India, wrote, "The truth is that Islam is not a church. It is a state conceived as a contractual organism. . . ."{16} Responding to the inability of Islam to accommodate the modern world, an Algerian Islamic activist points to the example of Muhammad:

> The Prophet himself did not opt to live far away from the camp of men. He did not say to youth: "Sell what you have and follow me. . . ." At Medina, he was not content merely to be the preacher of the new faith: he became also the leader of the new city, where he organized the religious, social and economic life. . . . Later, carrying arms, he put himself at the head of his troops.{17}

The powerful combination within Islam of immediate paradise for those who die while fighting for Allah and the unity of political, religious, and economic structures, helps us to understand the source of suicide bombers and children who dream of becoming one. Young Palestinians are lining up by the hundreds in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to volunteer for suicide missions. Eyad Sarraj, the director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Project, detects a widespread zeal.

“If they are turned down they become depressed. They feel they have been deprived of the ultimate award of dying for God.”{18} Palestinian support for suicide bombers is now at 70 to 80 percent.

Islam and Christianity both require its followers to sacrifice and turn from the world and self. Yet while Islam equates political conquest with the furtherance of Allah’s reign, Jesus taught that we render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s. Christianity recognizes that the advancement of God’s kingdom is not necessarily a political one. The New Testament did not advocate the overthrow of the Roman Empire. Muslims are given the example of Muhammad’s personal sacrifice in battle so that Allah’s enemies might be defeated. Christians are given the example of Christ who gave His life as a sacrifice, so that even His enemies might believe and have eternal life.

Notes

1. Robert Wright, www.msnbc.com/news, 10/30/2001.
2. Ibid.
3. Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), p 82.
4. Ibid., 84.
5. Ibid., 175.
6. The Quran states, “They ask thee Concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month. Say: ‘Fighting therein is a grave (offense)’; But graver is it In the sight of God To prevent access to the path of God.” (2:217)
7. John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), p 10.
8. Geisler & Saleeb, p 79.
9. Paul Johnson, *National Review*, October 15, 2001.
10. John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, p 13.
11. Bernard Lewis, “Jihad vs. Crusade,” *The Wall Street Journal,* September 27, 2001.

12. Sheikh Abdullah Bin Muhammad Bin Humaid, “Jihad in the Qur’an and Sunnah,” http://islamworld.net/jihad.html, p 4.
13. Ibid., p 8.
14. Qur’an 8:65.
15. Qur’an 8:15-16.
16. Kenneth Cragg & Marston Speight, *Islam From Within,* (Wadsworth Inc., 1980), p 213
17. Ibid., p 228.
18. Eric Silver, “Bomber quit intelligence service to join Hamas two days before attack,” *Independent Digital* (UK) Ltd, 03 December 2001, www.independent.co.uk.

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“The Author of the Pentateuch was Moses, Not Ezra, Right?”

First I want to thank you for your article Did Moses Write the Pentateuch?. Would you please elaborate on, or provide scriptural references or other reference sources that would identify the “basis” upon which Baruch Spinoza suggests that Ezra may have been the author. I know who Ezra was and I have read this in several commentaries but it has not been made clear as to how this conclusion is reached.

Spinoza was ejected from synagogue teaching because of his pantheistic world view and naturalistic approach to Biblical criticism. His scientific criticism of the Bible made him an early leader in the modern movement of higher criticism.

In his 1670 work *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he argued that since the Pentateuch refers to Moses in the third person and

includes an account of his death it could not have been written by Moses. By appointing Ezra as the author (which is later accepted in the documentary hypothesis promoted by Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen in the 19th century) it helps to push the composition date of the Old Testament into a later time frame. This has been a goal of many liberal theologians who have sought to debunk prophetic revelation by proving the authorship to be after the fact of events being predicted.

Gleason Archer, in his survey of the Old Testament, notes that ancient authors commonly referred to themselves in the third person. Xenophon and Julius Caesar both wrote in this manner and conservative scholars have long acknowledged that Joshua probably wrote the account Moses death.

I hope that this is helpful.

For Him,

Don Closson
Probe Ministries

The Crusades

The Crusades were more complex than the simple and unfair invasion of Muslim lands by Christians often portrayed in history books. There is cruelty and conquering on both sides.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

At the Council of Clermont in 1095 Pope Urban II called upon Christians in Europe to respond to an urgent plea for help from Byzantine Christians in the East. Muslims were threatening to conquer this remnant of the Roman Empire for

Allah. The threat was real; most of the Middle East, including the Holy Land where Christ had walked, had already been vanquished. Thus began the era of the Crusades, taken from the Latin word *crux* or cross. Committed to saving Christianity, the Crusaders left family and jobs to take up the cause. Depending on how one counts (either by the number of actual crusading armies or by the duration of the conflict), there were six Crusades between 1095 and 1270. But the crusading spirit would continue on for centuries, until Islam was no longer a menace to Europe.

There is a genuine difficulty for us to view the Crusades through anything but the eyes of a 21st century American. The notion of defending Christianity or the birthplace of Christ via military action is difficult to imagine or to support from Scripture, but perhaps a bit easier since the events of September 11th.

So when Christians today think about the Crusades, it may be with remorse or embarrassment. Church leaders, including the Pope, have recently made the news by apologizing to Muslims, and everyone else, for the events surrounding the Crusades. In the minds of many, the Crusades were an ill-advised fiasco that didn’t accomplish the goals of permanently reclaiming Jerusalem and the Holy Lands.

Are history books correct when they portray the Crusades as an invasion of Muslim territories by marauding Europeans whose primary motive was to plunder new lands? What is often left out of the text is that most of the Islamic Empire had been Christian and had been militarily conquered by the followers of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Islam had suddenly risen out of nowhere to become a threat to all of Christian Europe, and although it had shown some restraint in its treatment of conquered Christians, it had exhibited remarkable cruelty as well. At minimum, Islam enforced economic and religious discrimination against those

it controlled, making Jews and Christians second-class citizens. In some cases, Muslim leaders went further. An event that may have sparked the initial Crusade in 1095 was the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre by the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim.{1} In fact, many Christians at the time considered al-Hakim to be the Antichrist.

We want black and white answers to troubling questions, but the Crusades present us with a complex collection of events, motivations, and results that make simple answers difficult to find. In this article we'll consider the origins and impact of this centuries-long struggle between the followers of Muhammad and the followers of Christ.

The Causes

Historian Paul Johnson writes that the terrorist attacks of September 11th can be seen as an extension of the centuries-long struggle between the Islamic East and the Christian West. Johnson writes,

> *The Crusades, far from being an outrageous prototype of Western imperialism, as is taught in most of our schools, were a mere episode in a struggle that has lasted 1,400 years, and were one of the few occasions when Christians took the offensive to regain the "occupied territories" of the Holy Land.{2}*

Islam had exploded on the map by conquering territories that had been primarily Christian. The cities of Antioch, Alexandria, and Carthage had been the centers of Christian thought and theological inquiry for centuries before being taken by Muslim armies in their jihad to spread Islam worldwide. Starting in 1095 and continuing for over four hundred years, the crusading spirit that pervaded much of Europe can be seen as an act of cultural self-preservation, much as Americans now see the war against the Taliban in

Afghanistan.

One motivation for the Crusade in 1095 was the request for help made by the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I. Much of the Byzantine Empire had been conquered by the Seljuk Turks and Constantinople, the greatest Christian city in the world, was also being threatened. Pope Urban knew that the sacrifices involved with the call to fight the Turks needed more than just coming to the rescue of Eastern Christendom. To motivate his followers he added a new goal to free Jerusalem and the birthplace of Christ.

At the personal level, the Pope added the possibility of remission of sins. Since the idea of a pilgrim's vow was widespread in medieval Europe, crusaders, noblemen and peasant alike, vowed to reach the Holy Sepulcher in return for the church's pardon for sins they had committed. The church also promised to protect properties left behind by noblemen during travels east.

The Pope might launch a Crusade, but he had little control over it once it began. The Crusaders promised God, not the Pope to complete the task. Once on its way, the Crusading army was held together by "feudal obligations, family ties, friendship, or fear."{3}

Unlike Islam, Christianity had not yet developed the notion of a holy war. In the fifth century Augustine described what constituted a *just war* but excluded the practice of battle for the purpose of religious conversion or to destroy heretical religious ideas. Leaders of nations might decide to go to war for just reasons, but war was not to be a tool of the church.{4} Unfortunately, using Augustine's *just war* language, Popes and Crusaders saw themselves as warriors for Christ rather than as a people seeking justice in the face of an encroaching enemy threat.

The Events

The history books our children read typically emphasize the atrocities committed by Crusaders and the tolerance of the Muslims. It is true that the Crusaders slaughtered Jews and Muslims in the sacking of Jerusalem and later laid siege to the Christian city of Constantinople. Records indicate that Crusaders were even fighting among themselves as they fought Muslims. But a closer examination of the Crusades shows the real story is more complex than the public's perception or what is found in history books. The fact is that both Muslims and Christians committed considerable carnage and internal warfare and political struggles often divided both sides.

Muslims could be, and frequently were, barbaric in their treatment of Christians and Jews. One example is how the Turks dealt with German and French prisoners captured early in the First Crusade prior to the sacking of Jerusalem. Those who renounced Christ and converted to Islam were sent to the East; the rest were slaughtered. Even Saladin, the re-conqueror of Jerusalem was not always merciful. After defeating a large Latin army on July 3, 1187, he ordered the mass execution of all Hospitallers and Templars left alive, and he personally beheaded the nobleman Reynald of Chatillon. Saladin's secretary noted that:

> *He ordered that they should be beheaded, choosing to have them dead rather than in prison. With him was a whole band of scholars and Sufis . . . [and] each begged to be allowed to kill one of them, and drew his sword and rolled back his sleeve. Saladin, his face joyful, was sitting on his dais; the unbelievers showed black despair.{5}*

In fact, Saladin had planned to massacre all of the Christians in Jerusalem after taking it back from the Crusaders, but when the commander of the Jerusalem garrison threatened to destroy the city and kill all of the Muslims inside the walls, Saladin

allowed them to buy their freedom or be sold into slavery instead.{6}

The treachery shown by the Crusaders against other Christians is a reflection of the times. At the height of the crusading spirit in Europe, Frederick Barbarossa assembled a large force of Germans for what is now known as the third Crusade. To ease his way, he negotiated treaties for safe passage through Europe and Anatolia, even getting permission from Muslim Turks to pass unhampered. On the other hand, the Christian Emperor of Byzantium, Isaac II, secretly agreed with Saladin to harass Frederick's crusaders through his territory. When it was deemed helpful, both Muslim and Christian made pacts with anyone who might further their own cause. At one point the sultan of Egypt offered to help the Crusaders in their struggle with the Muslim Turks, and the Turks failed to come to the rescue of the Shi'ite Fatimid Muslims who controlled Palestine.

Human treachery and sinfulness was evident on both sides of the conflict.

The Results

On May 29, 1453 the city of Constantinople fell to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II. With it the 2,206-year-old Roman Empire came to an end and the greatest Christian church in the world, the Hagia Sophia, was turned into a mosque. Some argue that this disaster was a direct result of the Crusaders' misguided efforts, and that anything positive they might have accomplished was fleeting.

Looking back at the Crusades, we are inclined to think of them as a burst of short-lived, failed efforts by misguided Europeans. Actually, the crusading spirit lasted for hundreds of years and the Latin kingdom that was established in 1098, during the first Crusade, endured for almost 200 years. Jerusalem remained in European hands for eighty-eight years, a

period greater than the survival of many modern nations.

Given the fact that the Latin kingdom and Jerusalem eventually fell back into Muslim hands, did the Crusaders accomplish anything significant? It can be argued that the movement of large European armies into Muslim held territories slowed down the advance of Islam westward. The presence of a Latin kingdom in Palestine acted as a buffer zone between the Byzantine Empire and Muslim powers and also motivated Muslim leaders to focus their attention on defense rather than offense at least for a period of time.

Psychologically, the Crusades resulted in a culture of chivalry based on both legendary and factual exploits of European rulers. The crusading kings Richard the Lionheart and Louis IX were admired even by their enemies as men of integrity and valor. Both saw themselves as acting on God's behalf in their quest to free Jerusalem from Muslim oppression. For centuries, European rulers looked to the Crusader kings as models of how to integrate Christianity and the obligations of knighthood.

Unfortunately, valor and the ability to conduct warfare took precedent over all other qualities, perhaps because it was a holdover from Frankish pagan roots and the worship of Odin the warrior god. These Germanic people may have converted to Christianity, but they still had a place in their hearts for the gallant warrior's paradise, Valhalla.{7} As one scholar writes:

> *But the descendants of those worshippers of Odin still had the love of a warrior god in their blood, a god of warriors whose ultimate symbol was war.{8}*

The Crusades temporarily protected some Christians from having to live under Muslim rule as second-class citizens. Called the *dhimmi*, this legal code enforced the superiority of Muslims and humiliated all who refused to give up other religious

beliefs.

It is also argued that the crusading spirit is what eventually sent the Europeans off to the New World. The voyage of Columbus just happens to coincide with the removal of Muslim rule from Spain. The exploration of the New World eventually encouraged an economic explosion that the Muslim world could not match.

Summary

Muslims still point to the Crusades as an example of injustice perpetrated by the West on Islam. An interesting question might be, “Had the situation been reversed, would Muslims have felt justified in going to war against Christians?” In other words, would the rules in the Qur’an and the Hadith (the holy books of Islam) warrant a conflict similar to what the Crusaders conducted?

You have probably heard the term *jihad*, or struggle, discussed in the news. The word denotes different kinds of striving within the Muslim faith. At one level, it speaks of personal striving for righteousness. However, there are numerous uses of the term within Islam where it explicitly refers to warfare.

First, the Qur’an permits fighting to defend individual Muslims and the religion of Islam from attack.{9} In fact, all able bodied Muslims are commanded to assist in defending the community of believers. Muslims are also given permission to remove treacherous people from power, even if they have previously agreed to a treaty with them.{10}

Muslims are encouraged to use armed struggle for the general purpose of spreading the message of Islam.{11} The Qur’an specifically says, “Fighting is a grave offense, but graver is it in the sight of Allah to prevent access to the path of Allah, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque. .

. .”{12} Warfare is also justified for the purpose of purging a people from the bondage of idolatry or the association of anything with God. This gives the Muslim a theological reason to go to war against Christians, since the Qur’an teaches that the doctrine of the Trinity is a form of idolatry. Had the situation been reversed, the religion of Islam provides multiple rationalizations for the actions of the Crusaders.

But is there a Christian justification for the Crusades? The only example of a Christian fighting in the New Testament is the apostle Peter when he drew his sword to protect Jesus from the Roman soldiers. Jesus told him to put the sword away. Then He said, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” The kingdom that Jesus had established would not be built on the blood of the unbeliever, but on the shed blood of the Lamb of God.

The Crusader’s actions should be defended using Augustine’s “just war” language rather than a holy war vocabulary. Although they did not always live up to the dictates of “just war” ideals, such as the immunity of noncombatants, the Crusades were a last resort defensive war that sought peace for its people who had been under constant assault for many years.

If one of the functions of a God-ordained government is to restrain evil and promote justice, then it follows that rulers of nations where Christians dwell may need to conduct a *just war* in order to protect their people from invasion.

Notes

1. John Esposito, ed. *The Oxford History of Islam,* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 335.
2. Paul Johnson, National Review, http://www.nationalreview.com/15oct01/johnson101501.shtml.
3. Thomas F. Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades*,

(Rowman &
Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1999), 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ibid., 78.
6. Ibid., 80.
7. Zoe Oldenbourg, *The Crusades,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 33.
8. Ibid, 32.
9. Qur'an 2:190, 193.
10. Ibid, 8:58.
11. Ibid, 2:217 (also see www.irshad.org/islam/iiie/iiie_18.htm published by The Institute of Islamic Information & Education, P.O. Box 41129, Chicago, IL 60641-0129).
12. Qur'an 2:217.

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"Bishop Spong is a Hero!"

Dear Mr. Closson,

I have recently been introduced to Bishop Spong's works, and find them deeply affirming and inspiring! His claims are not speculative, but rather based in logic and a profound knowledge of biblical scholarship. For those of us who will not compromise our integrity with literal biblical interpretations and nonsensical, mythical stories, his works are a "special revelation."

Our society is overflowing with thinking people who feel alienated from Christianity. Better the church embrace its alienated multitudes, than eventually dwindle into insignificance. The truth should never shy away from new ideas

and open discourse. Because in the end, no matter what is said or done, the truth always prevails simply because it is the truth. If Christianity speaks the truth, it should stand up and embrace people like Bishop Spong and the rest of us. Show us the truth we are missing. Instead, I see Christianity shying away and hiding behind the security of premodern themes that require unthinking and unquestioning followers.

Just thought you might like to know.

Thanks for the thoughtful response to my essay on Bishop Spong. Your challenge to "show us the truth we are missing" is a reasonable request and one that I would like to respond to. But first I might suggest that one's approach to the evidence regarding the deity of Jesus Christ or the authority of the Bible (or any religious claim) is greatly affected by the presuppositions one holds regarding the nature of reality itself. Dr. Spong is a product of the enlightenment and approaches the issue with a strong naturalistic bias. His view of biblical scholarship, along with the members of the Jesus Seminar, is filtered through this naturalistic grid that not only rules out supernatural events but placing mankind's "happiness" (often sexual) as the ultimate good. He is perfectly free to do this, but to claim that this is "Christian" seems to be like trying to place a round peg in a square hole. Whether or not people are alienated by traditional Christian beliefs seem to be beside the point. Jesus himself said that the path is narrow and that many who called him Lord were not part of his kingdom.

It would seem to be far more consistent for Bishop Spong, and others who hold to naturalistic presuppositions, to claim a naturalistic form of humanism and quit using the language and symbols of Christianity as a cover for their humanity-centered (rather than God-centered) ethics.

As for Bishop Spong's profound knowledge of biblical scholarship, I do not challenge his knowledge of the Bible or

his sincerely held convictions about it. I would merely point to the fact that there are those with equal or superior academic credentials who accept the traditional view of the Bible as supernatural revelation, and that it calls individuals to saving faith in Jesus Christ. These scholars offer a thoughtful alternative to the ideas held by Spong and others of like mind. A couple of books that might interest you are:

> *A Passion For Truth, Alister McGrath (InterVarsity Press, 1996)*
>
> *Reasonable Faith, William Lane Craig (Crossway, 1994)*

Thanks again for your comments.

Sincerely,

Don Closson
Probe Ministries

The Empty Self

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland claims that Christians are not experiencing spiritual maturity because they are victims of something he calls the Empty-Self Syndrome. Don Closson examines his analysis and offers ways for Christians to avoid its influence.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Christian philosopher Dr. J. P. Moreland is a man with a mission. He claims that Christians are not experiencing spiritual maturity because they are victims of something he

calls the “Empty-Self Syndrome.”{1} This lack of maturity leaves believers without the necessary tools to impact their culture for God’s kingdom or to experience what the Bible calls the “mind of Christ.” According to Moreland, the purpose of life for believers is to bring honor to God. This involves finding one’s vocation and pursuing it for the good of both believers and non-believers, while in the process, being changed into a more Christ-like person. Doing this well involves developing intellectual and moral virtues over long periods of time and delaying the constant desire for immediate gratification.

Unfortunately, our culture teaches an entirely different set of virtues. It emphasizes a self-centered, consumption-oriented lifestyle, which works directly against possessing a mature Christian mind. It also places an unhealthy emphasis on living within the moment, rather than committing to long-term projects of personal discipline and learning.

To better understand his argument it helps to explain the concept of necessary and sufficient causes. A necessary cause for Christian maturity is salvation. For without the new birth, a person is still spiritually dead and devoid of the benefits of the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, although forgiveness of sin is necessary for Christian maturity, it is not sufficient. We cooperate with the Spirit to reach maturity by disciplining our will and intellect in the virtues outlined in the New Testament.

Writing to Titus, the apostle Paul said that a leader in the church should be “self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”{2} This admonition assumes a number of complex skills and a life of dedication to learning and teaching. Our leaders must be knowledgeable of the Scriptures, but they must also be able to defend the Christian worldview in the marketplace of ideas common to our

culture. The ability to give a response to those opposed to Christianity, and to do so with gentleness and respect, as Peter teaches (1 Peter 3:15), requires a confidence that comes with a life of devotion and study. Herbert Schlossberg writes:

> In their uncompromising determination to proclaim truth, Christians must avoid the intellectual flabbiness of the larger society. They must rally against the prevailing distrust of reason and the exaltation of the irrational. Emotional self-indulgence and irrationalities have always been the enemies of the gospel, and the apostles warned their followers against them.{3}

In this article we will consider Moreland's description of the empty-self syndrome and offer ways for Christians to avoid its influence.

Seven Traits of the Empty-Self

We are discussing a set of hindrances to Christian maturity called the "Empty-Self Syndrome." J.P Moreland, in his book *Love Your God With All Your Mind,* lists seven traits common to people who suffer from this self-inflicted malady. To some, it might appear that Moreland is describing a typical teenager and, in a sense, the analogy fits. The *empty-self* is best summarized by a lack of growth, both intellectually and spiritually, resulting in perpetual Christian adolescence.

Inordinate Individualism

The first trait of the empty-self is *inordinate individualism*. Those afflicted rarely define themselves as part of a community, or see their lives in the context of a larger group. This sense of rugged individualism is part of the American tradition and has been magnified with the increased mobility of the last century. People rarely feel a strong attachment or commitment even to family members. The empty-self derives life goals and values from within their own set

of personal needs and perceptions, allowing self-centeredness to reign supreme. Rarely does the empty-self seek the good of a broader community, such as the church, when deciding on a course of action.

Infantilism

Many observers of American culture note that adolescent personality traits are staying with young people well into what used to be considered adulthood. Stretching out a four-year college degree to five or six years and delaying marriage into the thirties are signs that commitment and hard work are not highly valued. Some go even further, seeing an *infantile demand for pleasure* pervading all of our culture. The result is that boredom becomes the greatest evil. We are literally entertaining ourselves to death with too much food, too little exercise, and little to live for beyond personal pleasure.

Narcissism

The empty-self is also *highly narcissistic*. Narcissism is a keenly developed sense of self-infatuation; as a result, personal fulfillment becomes the ultimate goal of life. It also can result in the manipulation of relationships in order to feed this sense. In its most dangerous form, one's relationship with God can be shaped by this need. God is dethroned in order to fit the individual's quest for self-actualization. This condition leaves people with the inability to make long-standing commitments and leads to superficiality and aloofness. Education and church participation are evaluated on the basis of personal fulfillment. They are not viewed as opportunities to use one's gifts for the good of others.

All of us are guilty of these attitudes occasionally. Christian growth is the process of peeling away layers of self-centered desires. The situation becomes serious when both the culture and the church affirm a self-centered orientation,

rather than a God-centered one.

According to Moreland, the couch potato is the poster child for the empty-self. Rather than equipping oneself with the tools necessary to impact the culture for Christ and His kingdom, many people choose to live vicariously through the lives and actions of others. Moreland writes, " . . . the pastor studies the Bible for us, the news media does our political thinking for us, and we let our favorite sports team exercise, struggle, and win for us."{4}

Passivity

The words we use to describe our free time support this notion of *passivity*. What was once referred to as a holiday or originally a holy day has become a vacation; what used to be a special time of proactive celebration has become a time for vacating. The goal seems to remain in a passive state while someone else is paid to amuse you.

One of the most powerful factors contributing to this passivity is the television. Watching TV encourages a passive stance towards life. Its very popularity is built upon the vicarious experiences it offers, from sports teams to soap operas. It is hard to imagine how a person who watches an average amount of TV, which is twenty five hours a week for elementary students, could have enough time left over to invest in the reading and study required to become a mature believer and defender of the faith. Our celebrity-centered culture encourages us to focus on the lives of a popular few rather than live our own lives to the fullest for God.

Sensate Culture

It follows naturally that the empty-self syndrome encourages the belief that the physical, sense-perceptible world is all that there is. Although Christians, by definition, should be immune from this attitude, they often act as if it were true. The resulting *sensate* culture loses interest in arguments for

transcendent truth or in ideas like the soul, and the consequence is a closing of the mind, as described by Allen Bloom in his best-selling book on university life in the late 1980s.{5} Students and the general public lose hope in the possibility that truth can be found in books, so they stop reading; or at least stop reading serious books about worldview issues. Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sarokin wrote that once a sensate culture takes over, a society has already begun to disintegrate due to the lack of intellectual resources necessary to maintain a viable community.{6}

Paul reminds us of the danger of the empty-self state of mind when he writes, "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."{7}

No Interior Life

Moreland claims that in the last few decades people have become far more concerned about external factors such as the possession of consumer goods, celebrity status, image, and power rather than the development of what he calls an *interior life*. It wasn't long ago that people were measured by the internal traits of virtue and morality, and it was the person who exhibited character and acted honorably who was held in high esteem. This kind of life was built upon contemplation of what might be called the "good life." After long deliberation, an individual then disciplined himself in those virtues most valued. Peter describes such a process for believers when he tells us to "add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."{8} He adds that "if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus

Christ."{9} The Christian life begins with faith, but grows by feeding the interior life in a disciplined manner.

Busy-ness

Almost everyone experiences the last trait of the empty-self to some degree: the hurried, *overly busy life*. Although most of us wouldn't think of it this way, busy-ness can actually be a form of idolatry. Anything that stands between a person and their relationship with God becomes an idol. As Richard Keyes puts it:

> Idolatry may not involve explicit denials of God's existence or character. It may well come in the form of an over-attachment to something that is, in itself, perfectly good. The crucial warning is this: As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol.{10}

Many pack their lives with endless activities in order to block out the emotional emptiness and spiritual hunger that fills their souls. Nothing but God Himself can meet that need. David cried out to God saying, "Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."{11} The empty-self attempts to replace God with things God has created, a life that's too busy for God is missing out on life itself.

The empty-self is highly individualistic, infantile, narcissistic, passive, sensate, without an interior life, and too busy.

Curing the Empty-Self Syndrome

Is there a vaccine for the Empty-Self Syndrome? In his book *Love Your God With All Your Mind,* J. P. Moreland lists six steps for avoiding the empty-self. Like all maladies, we must first admit that there is a problem. Christians need to

realize that faith and reason are not diametrically opposed to one another and that intellectual cultivation honors God. We need to begin talking about the role of the intellect and the value of a disciplined Christian mind. The results of not doing this will be a church with shallow theological understanding, little evangelistic confidence, and the inability to challenge the ideas that are dominant in the culture at-large. Christians will continue to be obsessed with self-help books that merely soothe, comfort, and entertain the reader.

Second, we need to choose to be different. We must be different from the typical church attendee who rarely reads or considers the questions and challenges of unbelievers, and different from the self-centered general culture that seeks knowledge only for power or financial gain.

Third, we might also need to change our routines. Believers would benefit by turning off the TV and instead participating in both physical exercise and quiet reflection. We need to get out of our passive ruts and be more proactive about growing spiritually and intellectually.

Fourth, we need to develop patience and endurance. The intellectual life takes time and diligence. It is a long-term, actually life-long, project and for some of us just sitting down for fifteen minutes might be difficult at first. Our newly developed patience is also needed for the fifth goal, that of developing a good vocabulary. As is true of any area of study, both theology and philosophy have their own languages and it takes time and effort to become conversant in them.

Finally, the last step is to establish intellectual goals. This is often best accomplished with the aid of a study partner or group. Setting out on a course of study and sharing what you find with someone else can be exhilarating. Although your study might begin in theology, it should eventually touch

on a broad spectrum of ideas. Even reading recognized critics of Christianity is of value if you take the time to develop a response to their criticisms.

We should also teach our children that their studies are an important way to honor God. We are not advocating the development of the mind merely to collect information or to advance one's career. Our goal is to accomplish what Paul demands in 2 Corinthians 10:5. It is to be able to demolish any obstacle, or any pretension to the emancipating knowledge of God. The picture Paul is painting is that of a military operation in enemy territory.{12} It's time to start training!

Notes

1. J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), see chapter four for this discussion.
2. Titus 1:8-9
3. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols For Destruction* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 322.
4. J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 90.
5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), see part one on the student.
6. Ibid., 91.
7. Philippians 3:19-20
8. 2 Peter 1:3-7
9. 2 Peter 1:8
10. Os Guinness & John Seel, *No God But God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 33.
11. Psalm 51:11-12
12. Murry J. Harris, *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 380.

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Did Moses Write the Pentateuch?

Introduction

Most Christians have been taught in Sunday school that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. These books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are often referred to as the Pentateuch or Torah. However, outside of the more conservative seminaries and churches, it is commonly held that Moses did not write these books, that they are a compilation of works by numerous writers over an extended period of time.

Religious studies courses at most universities teach that the Pentateuch is a composite work consisting of four literary strands. The four strands have been assigned the letters J, E, D, and P; each representing a different document or source that was woven into the fabric of the Bible. This set of assumptions has gone by a number of names including the documentary theory and the Graf-Wellhausen theory. According to this view, the letter "J" stands for the *Yahwist* ("J" from the German Jahweh) *narrative*, coming from the period of the early Jewish monarchy, about 950 B.C. "E" stands for the *Elohist narrative* from the region of the Northern Kingdom dating from about 750 B.C. "D" is best represented by the book of Deuteronomy and is said to have originated in the Southern Kingdom about 650 B.C. or later. And finally, "P" is the priestly document that comes from the period after the fall of Israel in 587 B.C. According to the theory, the Pentateuch reached its current form around the time of Ezra or about 400 B.C.

Why is the issue of Mosaic authority an important one? Those who accept the documentary or Graf-Wellhausen theory argue that the content of these books should be seen as a mixture of credible historical events and religious poetry sparked by man's religious imagination. For example, regarding Moses and God on Mount Sinai, one author of an Old Testament survey writes that, "It would be foolish, for instance, to rationalize the burning bush, as though this vision were something that could have been seen with the objective eye of a camera."{1} Holders of this view reject the notion of supernatural revelation and regard much of the Pentateuch as folklore and Hebrew storytelling.

On the other hand, the conservative view holds to Mosaic authorship and treats the books as a literary unit. This does not mean that Moses didn't use other documents to write his books. He obviously did. But since other Old Testament authors affirm Mosaic authorship, as do numerous New Testament writers and the early church fathers, the veracity of the Bible as a whole begins to crumble if Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch.

In this article we will take a closer look at the source of the documentary theory regarding Mosaic authorship and offer a response that argues for the integrity of the Bible.

Origins Of The Documentary Hypothesis

For almost two thousand years Christians accepted Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. That's not to say that some didn't acknowledge problems with the text. Many had noted what seemed to be two separate creation stories in Genesis, as well as the problem of Moses recording his own death in Deuteronomy 34.

In 1753, a French physician named Jean Astruc began the modern study of source or literary analysis by writing a commentary on the book of Genesis.{2} He noted that the first chapter of

Genesis refers to God as Elohim, while the second chapter uses mostly Jehovah or Yahweh. Astruc believed that Moses must have used two different sources in writing Genesis, each having different names for God, and that the Elohim source was the older. This established the first principle of what would become known as the documentary hypothesis, the assumption that different divine names must mean different authors or sources. In 1780 Johann Eichhorn took this theory and ran with it. He applied the idea of two sources to the rest of Genesis, Exodus, and finally to most of the Pentateuch. He eventually gave up on the view of Mosaic authorship as well.

The next step came in 1805, when Wilhem De Wette argued that none of the Pentateuch was written before David. He established the "D" document standing for Deuteronomy, which he believed was written as propaganda to support political and religious unification in Jerusalem during the reign of king Josiah around 621 B.C. We now have three source documents: J, E, and D. Although others in the late 1700's and early 1800's found as many as thirty-nine fragments in Genesis alone, the final, "P" or Priestly document of the current theory was added by Hermann Hupfeld in 1853. He believed that the E source should be split in two, the later becoming the new P document.

The name most associated with the documentary hypothesis is Julius Wellhausen. His publications in the late 1870's didn't add much new information to the theory, but rather argued for it from a Darwinistic perspective. Wellhausen claimed that the J, E, D, P sequence followed the development from primitive animism towards the more sophisticated monotheism that would be expected as the Jewish culture and religion evolved. The impact of this connection was immediate and powerful.

Even though both liberal and conservative scholars removed much of the foundation of the documentary hypothesis in the twentieth century, the idea remains entrenched. As Gleason Archer states, "For want of a better theory . . . most non-

conservative institutions continue to teach the Wellhausian theory, at least in its general outlines, as if nothing had happened in Old Testament scholarship since the year 1880."{3}

Problems With The Documentary Hypothesis

Let's now look at the problems with this theory.

First, it should be mentioned that conservative experts did not sit idly by as this theory developed and spread. In the late 1800's Princeton Seminary scholars Joseph Alexander and William Green "subjected the documentarian school to devastating criticism which has never been successfully rebutted by those of liberal persuasion," according to Gleason Archer.{4} In Germany, Ernst Wilhem Hengstenberg ably defended the Mosaic authorship of all five books of the Pentateuch. His 1847 book *The Genuineness of the Pentateuch* did much to encourage conservative thinking.

It should also be noted that the Wellhausen theory found what it was looking for. The theory grew out of a movement to find rationalistic, natural explanations for the biblical text. Once one assumes that supernatural revelation cannot occur any other explanation must take precedent. The late dates and various authors assigned to the books allow for purely naturalistic sources. This is a textbook case of question begging. The underlying premise, that there can be no such thing as supernatural revelation, resulted in the conclusion that the Bible is not a supernaturally revealed document.{5}

Another problem with the theory is that it assumes that "Hebrew authors differ from any other writers known in the history of literature in that they alone were incapable of using more than one name for God," or for that matter, more than one style of writing.{6} It is interesting that the Qur'an (Koran) uses multiple names for God, but few question that Muhammad was its sole author. Regarding the various writing styles, it would be like arguing that C. S. Lewis

could not possibly have written children's stories, literary critiques, science fiction, and allegorical satire; and insisting that numerous sources must have been involved. Educated as an Egyptian prince, Moses would have been exposed to many writing styles that were available during that period.

Another bias is evident in how critics regard the biblical data as unreliable and suspect, despite its old age even by their own dating methods. The tendency is to disregard the biblical content immediately when a non-biblical source disagrees with it, even when the biblical document is older. In the words of one conservative Old Testament scholar:

> *It makes no difference how many biblical notices, rejected as unhistorical by nineteenth-century pundits, have been confirmed by later archaeological evidence (such as the historicity of Belshazzar, the Hittites, and the Horites), the same attitude of skeptical prejudice toward the Bible has persisted, without any justification.{7}*

In the next section we will continue to offer arguments against the documentary hypothesis and for the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible.

A Conservative Approach

Despite what Gleason Archer calls "The overwhelming contrary evidence from Genesis to Malachi," advocates of the Wellhausen theory cling to its most fundamental principle: that the religion of the Jews evolved from primitive animism to a more sophisticated monotheism.{8}

But their unsupported assumptions don't stop there. Modern scholars assume that Hebrew writers never used the repetition of ideas or occurrences even though authors in other ancient Semitic languages did so. They also assume that they can scientifically date the texts, even though they have no other ancient Hebrew writings to compare them with. Documentary

scholars have felt free to amend the text by substituting more common words for rare or unusual words that they do not understand or do not expect to see in a given context.{9} Although it claims to be scientific, the documentary hypothesis is anything but neutral.

What are the arguments for Mosaic authorship? First, there are numerous passages in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that point to Moses as author. For instance, Exodus 34:27 says, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'" In fact, there are references throughout the Old Testament (Joshua, 1 & 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Malachi) that claim that Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

New Testament writers assumed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible as well. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus refers to laws regarding marriage in Deuteronomy and credits Moses with writing them. In John 5:46 Jesus says, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." (See 7:19 also.) In Romans 10:5 Paul states that Moses wrote the law. It would be hard not to attribute either deception or error to Christ and the apostles if Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

There are many other internal evidences that point to Mosaic authorship. The writer of Exodus gives eyewitness details of the event that only a participant would know about. The author of Genesis and Exodus also portrays remarkable knowledge of Egyptian names and places. This knowledge is evident even in the style of writing used. One scholar has noted that the writer used "a large number of idioms and terms of speech, which are characteristically Egyptian in origin, even though translated into Hebrew."{10}

Having received training in the most advanced literate culture of the day as well as having access to the Jewish oral tradition make Moses a remarkably able and likely candidate

for God to use in documenting the founding of the Jewish nation.

Summary

Now let's consider the current state of Old Testament studies.

Since 1670, when the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1631-1677) suggested that Ezra might have authored the Pentateuch, source criticism has grown to such an extent that it has successfully removed serious consideration of Mosaic authorship for many scholars. However, the twentieth century has seen the pillars supporting the Wellhausen theory, also known as the documentary hypothesis, weakened or removed. The result has been the uncomfortable reliance by many scholars on a system of literary criticism that no longer has a firm foundation. As one Old Testament scholar has written:

> *Wellhausen's arguments complemented each other nicely, and offered what seemed to be a solid foundation upon which to build the house of biblical criticism. Since then, however, both the evidence and the arguments supporting the structure have been called into question and, to some extent, even rejected. Yet biblical scholarship, while admitting that the grounds have crumbled away, nevertheless continues to adhere to the conclusions.{11}*

Beginning at the turn of the century, scholars have challenged the divine-names criterion for determining authorship. W. F. Albright, who remained within the documentary camp, called the minute analysis of the Pentateuch after Wellhausen "absurd" and "irrational."{12} Hermann Gunkel, who introduced a new type of criticism called form criticism, came to the conclusion that "we really know nothing for certain about these hypothetical documents of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis."{13} In other words, he refused to accept the numerous authors for the Pentateuch, particularly the J, E,

and P sources, that had been speculated about by scholars for decades. There are too many critics to mention by name, but the cumulative effect has been substantial.

Where does this leave us today? In one sense it has left the scholarly community in search for new foundations. But even for those who reject the possibility of supernatural revelation, the evidence from archeology, the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran, and information about the languages of the ancient orient are making dependence on the Wellhausen theory inexcusable.

There is a trend among scholars to view the Pentateuch as a literary unit again. Scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs, parallel narrative structure, and deliberate theological arrangement of literary units for teaching and memorization support viewing the five books as a literary whole.{14} If this becomes the accepted view, Mosaic authorship can again be entertained.

Notes

1. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding The Old Testament*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 37.

2. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), 81.

3. Ibid., 88.

4. Ibid., 85.

5. Ibid., 105.

6. Ibid., 106.

7. Ibid., 107.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 108.

10. Ibid., 113.

11. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 81.

12. Archer, 94.

13. Ibid., 95.

14. Andrew Hill & John H. Walton, *A Survey Of The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 81.

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Christ's Inner Circle – The Primary Apostles of Jesus

Don Closson examines the ministry and role of the four most prominent apostles, Peter, Andrew, John and James. He shows how these primary apostles were changed from fishermen into true fishers of men through the power of the Lord.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Matthew 10:2-4 records:

> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Christians hold in high esteem (excluding Judas Iscariot) those who were personally called by Jesus and who walked with Him during His ministry on Earth. That is especially true of the twelve Apostles. The Greek words used for apostle convey both the notions of sending or dispatching (*apostolos*) as well as the idea of commissioning someone with divine authorization (*apostello*). The idea of apostleship might be traced back to the Hebrew notion of an envoy. This Jewish institution would have been familiar to Jesus and is well documented in the rabbinic writings where it refers to "one who has been authorized to carry out certain functions on behalf of another." A well-known Jewish adage is "a man's envoy is as himself."

It is interesting to note that Jesus called to Himself those whom He wished (Mark 3:13-14). There were no volunteers. They were to travel, share food, and live with Jesus, experiencing firsthand His life and ministry. They were then sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, and that they had been commissioned to act as Jesus' representatives with His authority.

Lists of the Twelve are found in four places in the New Testament, and comparisons of the lists can reveal important information about the apostles. Peter is always mentioned first and Judas Iscariot last. The twelve are also listed in three groups of four, the first four always being Peter, Andrew, James, and John. This group of four apostles had a special relationship with Christ and will be the focus of this article.

Another interesting insight into the make-up of the group can be found in the process used to replace Judas Iscariot after his death. The first chapter of Acts states that Judas' replacement must have accompanied the apostles from the beginning. In other words, he must have been present at John's baptism of Christ and still around to see Jesus' ascension into heaven. It was also noted that he must have been an

eyewitness to the resurrection. The apostles were eyewitnesses to the life, teachings, miracles, and finally the death and resurrection of our Lord. This was essential for them to have a clear and accurate testimony of the Messiah.

In this article we will look at the inner circle of Christ's apostles: Peter, Andrew, James and John. We will see how God changed the lives of these ordinary men forever.

The Apostle Peter

In every one of the four lists of the Apostles found in the New Testament, Peter is always mentioned first. Peter is often called the *primus inter pares* or the first among equals. It is obvious that he plays a leadership role among his fellow apostles and is recognized by Christ as a foundation of the church. Although we might debate what this leadership role is, we cannot deny its existence.

The New Testament gives Peter four names. His Hebrew name was Symeon, which in Greek is Simon. Peter was probably a bilingual Jew who was influenced by the Greek culture in Galilee at the time. John records that Jesus gave him the Aramaic name Cephas which translates as Peter in Greek and means "a rock." This new name given by Jesus is an indication of how Peter would change while under the Lord's influence. Peter's early impetuousness would be transformed into that of a stable, charismatic witness for Christ.

Unlike many of the other Apostles, the New Testament gives us some background information about Peter's family life. His father's name was Jonah or John and we know that he was married. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14), and Paul mentions that Peter took his wife with him on journeys to various churches (1 Cor. 9:5). Peter probably lived with his brother, Andrew, in Bethsaida and later moved to Capernaum as he followed Jesus in ministry.

Peter became a disciple in the very early days of Jesus' ministry. John mentions an early encounter with Jesus after Andrew introduces the two. Later, perhaps a year or so, Matthew and Mark record Jesus calling Peter to full-time ministry as a fisher of men.

As an apostle, Peter plays a significant role among the Twelve. Peter is often singled out and the rest are mentioned as a group with him (Mark 1:36). He also acts as a spokesman for the group. In Luke 12 he asks Jesus about the meaning of a parable. In Matthew 16 he affirms Jesus as the Messiah, and then in chapter 19 he reminds Jesus of the sacrifices made by the apostles as a group. He is often the first to act as well. Matthew 14 records Peter's attempt to meet Jesus on the water, even though he loses heart midway.

Peter's leadership role lends added significance to a number of events in the Bible. For instance, the detail given of Peter's denial of Jesus has its impact precisely because of Peter's prominence in the group. Also, the account in John chapter 21 of Jesus questioning Peter's love and admonishing him to "feed my sheep" takes on poignancy.

The Apostle Peter and His Brother Andrew

The Roman Catholic Church has long used Matthew 16:17-19 as justification for the office of the Pope and the succession of popes starting with Peter. Protestants have reacted by tending to downplay Peter's significance as a leader among the apostles and any special office that he might hold in the body of Christ. As I mentioned previously, Peter is clearly represented as the leader of the apostles. However, the use of this passage in Matthew to justify the modern office of the Pope reads too much into the Scriptures.

For instance, Matthew 16 says nothing about Peter's successors, their infallibility, or their authority. Part of the problem with ascribing these attributes to Peter's

successor is that he would have had authority over a still living apostle, John. Peter is the first to make a formal confession of faith (Matt. 16:16), but he continues on as a very fallible part of the team Christ has assembled. He is sent, along with John, by the apostles to Samaria, when word had come that some had accepted the word of God there. In Acts 11 the church in Jerusalem took issue with Peter's entering a gentile's home. Although they eventually agreed with his explanation, they still had the authority to question Peter's actions. In Galatians, Paul writes that he rebuked Peter to his face for separating himself from the Gentiles when accompanied by Jews from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11). The New Testament allows us to claim Peter as the leader of the apostles, but not the first in a line of infallible popes.

Where Peter is outspoken and prominent, his brother Andrew was happy to play a background role among the Twelve. Andrew worked in his father's fishing business with Peter in Bethsaida and probably shared a home with Peter until Peter's marriage.

Although Andrew is listed as one of the inner circle closest to Jesus, we do not have a lot of information about his ministry. He is first mentioned as a follower of John the Baptist. When John directs his followers towards Jesus, Andrew is quick to seek time with the Lord. After listening to Jesus for a few hours, Andrew is convinced that Jesus is the messiah and immediately begins to tell others, starting with his brother Peter.

Andrew has been called "the apostle who shared Christ personally." Andrew was recorded as one who brought people to Christ. First he brings Peter to the Lord, then at Passover he introduces searching Greek Gentiles to Jesus. When food is needed to feed the multitude, Andrew brings a child with bread and fish.

Andrew may not have had the leadership qualities of his

brother Peter. He is never noted for his eloquent speech or his bold actions. However, one can imagine Andrew's heart when his brother, whom he introduced to the Lord, preached in the power of the Spirit in Jerusalem, resulting in thousands of new believers. Andrew may have played a background role among the inner circle of Christ's followers, but it was a vital role just the same.

The Sons of Zebedee

James and John make up the other pair of brothers who were part of Christ's inner circle. Like Peter and Andrew, they were also from Bethsaida and worked together with them in the fishing industry. They were known as the "sons of thunder" because of their fiery temperaments, which would occasionally give rise to some awkward moments (Mark 3:17). Their father, Zebedee, and mother, Salome, were probably well off materially. The family is mentioned to have had servants (Mark 1:20) and Salome ministered to Jesus with her resources (Matthew 27:55-56). John implies that Salome is Mary's sister, making James and John cousins to Jesus (John 19:25).

Both James and John are members of the first group of four apostles, always mentioned first in lists of the Twelve. But they are also part of what might be called the inner three, those into whom Christ poured special time and teachings.

It is widely recognized that the designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved" refers to the apostle John. John stands out among the apostles as being the only one to have witnessed the crucifixion and afterwards, took Jesus' mother home to live with him (John 19:25-27). He was also the first of the twelve to see the empty tomb.

John was first a follower of John the Baptist. That meant that he was seriously seeking God prior to meeting Jesus and was primed to make a commitment to the Messiah. He and Andrew had an early encounter with Jesus before becoming full time

disciples. Both had spent time listening to the Lord and becoming convinced of His authenticity. While with Jesus, their temperaments became evident on a number of occasions. Luke describes an incident in which John asks Jesus if they should call down fire on a Samaritan village that had refused them hospitality (Luke 9:54). Having just experienced the transfiguration of Jesus, John was indignant at the lack of proper respect for his Lord.

There is also the well-known incident when Salome asks Jesus to place one of her sons at His right hand when He establishes His kingdom (Matthew 20:21). Jesus responds sharply to the request by telling them that they do not know what they are asking. He asks them, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” (Matthew 20:22) With their typical bravado, they answer, “We can.” They were still hoping that Jesus was about to establish a political kingdom in Israel. They did not realize that His kingdom would begin with His sacrificial, atoning death on the cross. It is somewhat fitting that James becomes the first martyr from among the Twelve. Acts 12 records that Herod Agrippa had James put to death by the sword probably around 42 A.D. (Acts 12:2)

The apostle John was an interesting combination: the disciple Jesus loved, and yet one who could be intolerant and self-seeking. James would be the first to die a martyr, and yet his brother would live the longest of all the apostles. Next we will look at the legacy left by the inner circle of Jesus and what we can learn from their lives.

The Legacy of Those Closest to Jesus

John writes in Revelation 21:10, 14:

> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve

apostles of the Lamb.

Whether this verse refers to an actual city as many argue, or to the church or body of Christ, as others hold, it portrays the remarkable honor allotted to the Twelve Apostles. And among the Twelve, Jesus poured His life into an inner circle that had a key role in establishing the church. Peter, Andrew, James and John were privileged to be with Jesus when He healed Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), and at the Transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9:2). They were the audience at the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:3) and were with Jesus during His time of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37).

These four men left quite a legacy. Peter is credited with providing the material for the book of Mark and the two epistles given his name. He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem during the first 15 years covered in the first twelve books of Acts, after which James, the brother of Jesus, took over. Peter then became a missionary to the Jews and to a lesser degree, the Gentiles. Although tradition gives Peter credit for leading the church at Rome, it is unlikely. Yet he did go there near the end of his ministry and probably suffered martyrdom there.

The last mention we have of Andrew is in the upper room with Jesus. The book of Acts is silent regarding him. Tradition has Andrew traveling as a missionary to Russia and meeting martyrdom by crucifixion at Patras in Greece around 60 A.D.

We know that James was the first of the Twelve to be put to death. Thus he left no writings. Tradition has it that the officer guarding James was so taken by his testimony that he repented and was beheaded with the apostle.

Finally, we have the apostle John. Along with internal evidence from the book of John, early church fathers Irenaeus and Polycrates identify the apostle John as the "disciple Jesus loved." Having lived the life of an apostle the longest,

John wrote the fourth gospel, the remarkable book of Revelation, and three epistles to the church. Of all Christ's followers, John conveys the majesty of Christ the most clearly. According to tradition, John spent his last days in Ephesus, traveling there after the death of Domitian (who had exiled him to the Isle of Patmos). John's followers, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius, would become pillars in Christ's church, just as John had been.

Ordinary fishermen, these four men are a testimony to the life changing impact that walking with our Savior can have on anyone who chooses to be His disciple.

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Jesus: Political Martyr or Atoning God?

Introduction

Every Easter season journalists feel obliged to write something relating to Jesus and the passion narratives. This year our paper covered the current struggle many are having over the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. The paper quotes a seminary professor in Atlanta who has observed that more and more of his students are rejecting the traditional view of why Christ died and what His death accomplished. The professor says, "They don't consider Jesus a ransom for sin. They shudder at hymns glorifying the 'power of the blood.' They cringe at calling the day Jesus died Good Friday."{1} Yet even more serious is their rejection of a God who required a human sacrifice in order to forgive people. This version of

God simply does not mesh with their views of how a God who “is love” would behave.

Although disturbing, we shouldn’t be surprised. Our culture has been moving away from a biblical view of truth and toward the acknowledgment of just one moral duty or virtue, that is—tolerance. This new absolute requires that we be tolerant of every possible faith assumption and moral system except, it seems, the traditional Christian view of God and salvation. It’s not that we have new information about the life of Jesus or the reason for His death. As a society we no longer want to hear about a God who is holy and requires satisfaction when His moral order is violated. This view applies the notion “I’m OK, you’re OK to God.” Maybe if we tolerate Him, even with His outdated notions of holiness, He will tolerate us in our fallenness.

Was Jesus just a political martyr, or was his death an atonement for sin? What is remarkable is that some individuals who claim to be Christian, who desire seminary training, reject what the Bible teaches about the nature of God and the salvation He has provided in Christ. When cut-off from the Bible, our perception of God can become a mere reflection of our culture’s likes and dislikes. Even when the Bible is consulted, it is often interpreted through the lens of absolute tolerance. However, if the necessity of Christ’s death for our sins is denied, the Gospel is no longer Good News and Christianity’s message of grace is abandoned, leaving us with an ethical system with no basis for forgiveness or reconciliation with God.

Unfortunately, the Bible contains a lot of bad news. It says that because of the Fall we are in bondage to sin and the kingdom of Satan, and that without Christ everyone is separated from God and under His wrath. As a result, we all deserve death and eternal punishment. Why then do we call the biblical message Gospel or good news? How does the death of Christ relate to mankind’s precarious condition? How has the

church attempted to explain what the death of Christ accomplished? Lets take a deeper look at what theologians call the atonement.

What Did Jesus' Death Accomplish?

As we mentioned earlier, the notion of God requiring a blood sacrifice for sin is becoming less and less palatable to modern tastes. It is not surprising then that many question the idea that the death of Christ was an atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins.

What did the death of Jesus accomplish? As we investigate this issue, we should keep in mind that the answer depends on what one believes to be true concerning the kind of person God the Father is, who Jesus Christ is, and the current condition of mankind. For instance, if God the Father is not all that upset by sin, or if Jesus was just a good man and no more, the death of Christ might be seen as an encouragement or example to mankind, not as a payment for sin. This, in fact, is the first view of the atonement we will consider.

In the sixteenth century Laelius Socinus taught that the obedience and death of Jesus were part of a perfect life that was pleasing to God and should be seen primarily as an example for the rest of humanity. Socinians rejected the idea of Jesus being a payment for sin. To support this view they point to 1 Peter 2:21 which says "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." As mentioned earlier, one's view of the atonement depends on his or her view of God and humanity. The Socinians taught that mankind is capable of living in a manner pleasing to God, both morally and spiritually. They accepted the teachings of Pelagius, a 4th century theologian who argued that mankind is able to take the initial steps toward salvation independent of God's help. This Socinian tenet became the foundation of Unitarian thought which rejects the notion of the Trinity as well.

There are a number of passages in the Bible that make the Socinian perspective untenable. Even the passage in 1 Peter 2 works against their view. Jesus was an example for us, but verse 24 adds that, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the Jews the need for atonement, a way for God’s people to return to a harmonious relationship with God. The annual “Day of Atonement” sacrifice was instituted to cleanse Israel from all of her sins, thus removing God’s wrath from the nation. The book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus was the perfect high priest as well as the perfect sacrifice, making the final atonement for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17). Yes, Jesus was an example of a sinless human life, but He was so much more than that.

Views of the Atonement

Many modern day theologians argue that Jesus did no more than die a martyr’s death on behalf of the poor and marginalized people of the world. His death was more a political act than a spiritual one. As one scholar writes, “The salvation he brings is a transformation of the social order. . .”{2} According to this view, Jesus is to be seen as a political figure who challenged the power structures of His day and offered salvation through class warfare and the redistribution of wealth. Needless to say, this has not been the position held by the church for the last two thousand years.

In light of the Socinian theory, that the death of Jesus was merely an example and that salvation comes by living like Jesus lived, a response quickly followed by a man named Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). Where Socinus taught that we were only required to do our best and respond to God’s love for salvation, Grotius pictured God differently. Grotius focused

on the holiness and righteousness of God, and the fact that this holy God has established a universe governed by moral laws. Sin is defined as a violation of these laws. Sin is not necessarily an attack on the person of God but on the office of ruler that God holds. As ruler, God has the right, but not necessarily the obligation, to punish sin. God can forgive sin and remove humanity's guilt if He so chooses. Grotius held that God did indeed choose to be gracious and yet acted in a manner that teaches the severity of sin. As one theologian has written:

> *It was in the best interest of humankind for Christ to die. Forgiveness of their sins, if too freely given, would have resulted in undermining the law's authority and effectiveness. It was necessary to have an atonement which would provide grounds for forgiveness and simultaneously retain the structure of moral government.{3}*

Often called the "governmental theory" of the atonement, it argues that the death of Christ was a real offering to God, enabling Him to deal mercifully with mankind. The chief impact of the act was on man, not on God. God didn't need to have His wrath satisfied by blood atonement, but humanity did need to be taught the severity of sin and only an act of great magnitude could accomplish this lesson.

Although this is an interesting approach, it lacks scriptural confirmation. As one critic notes, "We search in vain in Grotius for specific biblical texts setting forth his major point." Being a lawyer, Grotius was attracted to the Old Testament idea expressed in Isaiah 42:21 which says that God will magnify His law and make it glorious. Fortunately, the New Testament reveals that God had a plan to both maintain His law and provide a gracious plan of substitutional atonement in Christ.

Views of the Atonement

Modern theologians like Dr. Marcus Borg, who teaches at Oregon State University, doubt that Jesus understood His death to be an atonement for sin. He teaches that Jesus was only aware of the political and religious implications of His actions.{4} How does this compare with teaching on this subject down through the centuries?

So far we have considered the historical views of Socinus and Grotius regarding the atonement. Both taught that the death of Christ primarily affected humanity. Socinus argued that Christ gave us a model to follow: a blueprint for living a good life. Grotius taught that Christ's death served to give humanity an accurate picture of the devastating impact of sin.

One of the earliest views of the atonement was quite different from both of these perspectives. Often called the ransom theory, this teaching was developed by the Church Fathers Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. It was probably the way Augustine thought about the atonement as well, and it was popular until the time of Anselm in the eleventh century (1033-1109).

Origen held that the Bible teaches believers "were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), and that Jesus told His followers that He was a ransom for many and that His death has delivered us from the dominion of darkness (Mk. 10:45, Col. 1:13). From this he surmised that Christ's death actually was a payment to Satan, buying, if you will, those held hostage by the fallen angel. Origen argued the death of Christ mostly impacted Satan, paying him off in order to gain the release of his captives. While it is true that we were bought at a price and have been delivered from darkness, the Bible never mentions that sinners owe anything to Satan.

Gregory of Nyssa held that God actually tricked Satan to gain our release. Satan thought he was getting a perfect man to replace the many already in his grasp. Instead God tricked him

by wrapping Christ's humanity around His deity. However, the notion that Jesus was offered primarily as a sacrifice to Satan didn't fit well with Scripture.

Instead, the Bible often speaks of the need to appease the wrath of God. Romans 3:25 tells us that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement or a propitiation. The Greek word used here carries that meaning of "a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God—and thereby makes God propitious (or favorable) towards us."{5} Hebrews 2:17 states: "For this reason he (Jesus) had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." 1 John 2:1-2 adds that Jesus "Speaks to the Father in our defense" and "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The impact of the atonement is not on Satan, but on God the Father.

The Satisfaction Theory

Did he die as a political martyr, having no notion that His death might accomplish something eternally significant? Or did Jesus and His followers assume that his death fulfilled a divine purpose? It is common for modern thinkers to discount the supernatural elements in their explanations of his death. For instance, historian Paula Fredriksen, professor at Boston University, argues that both his arrest and the events that followed probably shocked Jesus.{6} She implies that the death of Jesus and the birth of Christianity are to be thought of and analyzed only at the political or sociological level: that nothing miraculous occurred. This is obviously not the traditional view of the church.

Most evangelical Christians hold to an Anselmic view of the atonement. Anselm (1033-1109) was the archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century. He constructed a logical argument that God must, and did, become a man in the person of Jesus Christ because of the necessity of the atonement. According to

Anselm, when mankind sinned it took something from God. By rebelling against God's holiness and failing to recognize the authority that God has to rule, humanity failed to render God His due. Not only have we taken from God what is His, we have injured His reputation and owe compensation.

God must act in a manner consistent with His role of creator and ruler of the cosmos. He cannot arbitrarily choose to ignore a challenge to His authority. We cannot merely pay back or make reparations for our personal sin. Compensation is necessary for the damage done to all creation since the Fall, and this compensation is greater than what our deaths alone would repay: thus the necessity of both the incarnation and the atonement.

The Anselmic view carries with it some important implications.

First, it holds that humanity is unable to satisfy the harm done by sin. God had to act on our behalf or salvation would be impossible.

Second, God's actions show that He is both holy and just, and at the same time a remarkably loving God.

Third, this view highlights the centrality of grace in Christian theology. Each person must accept the infinitely valuable and gracious gift of God's provision for sin because our own efforts to please God will always fall short.

The Anselmic perspective gives believers a great deal of security. We know that it is not our works that earn salvation, but Christ's sacrificial death that paid the price for sin even before we committed our first transgression.

Finally, Christ's death on the cross highlights the horrible price for sin. With this knowledge we should be eternally grateful for what God has done on our behalf.{7}

Notes

1. Susan Hogan-Albach, “Christians struggle with the meaning of the cross,” *Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, April 7, 2001, 2G.

2. Ibid., 3G.

3. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 790.

4. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

5. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 254.

6. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

7. Erickson, 822-823.

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The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

Don Closson looks at the threat materialism poses to the church and proposes ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

One of the most popular rock songs of the seventies begins with the lyrics, “There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold and she’s buying a stairway to heaven.” The words, written by Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones of the group Led Zeppelin, reflects the fashionable message of anti-

materialism that pervaded much of rock music in the late sixties and seventies. The notion of dropping out of the rat race and rejecting the corporate mentality of one's parents formed the foundation of many a rock musician's career. Today, one often hears people refer to the entire decade of the eighties as the "me decade" as if during that period of time Americans were somehow more self- centered and money hungry than during any that came before it. One popular newspaper framed the mindset with a poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub is watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won't take.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus' life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for money and things. He pleads with us to go beyond concerns for what we will consume and to seek our creator and His will. In Matthew 6:24-25 Jesus taught that "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do

not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”

In spite of the fact that materialism is apparently held in low regard by large segments of both popular and religious culture, surveys indicate that it influences the thinking of many Americans. In a recent survey, George Barna found that seventy-two percent of Americans believed that people are blessed by God so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, and fifty-eight percent agreed with the statement that the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment. Eighty-one percent believed that God helps those who help themselves. These responses point to the validity of what has been called our “therapeutic culture.” The first commandment of this culture appears to be *do whatever makes you feel good, whatever helps you to cope materially.* When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment He responded by saying we are to love God (not things) with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:30, 31). That kind of love is self-denying and sacrificial.

In this article, I will look at the threat materialism poses to the church and propose ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

In his book *The Gospel and the American Dream*, Bruce Shelley tells the true story of a man who boasted to others that he would be a millionaire by age thirty-five. This young man was known as a really nice guy with a good sense of humor. He was considered bright, thoughtful, and generous to a fault. In 1984 he had acquired many of the appearances of success. He was flying to Dallas from Phoenix weekly on business. He drove a nice company car, and had moved his family into an exclusive neighborhood. He was also doing all the things that wealthy

young men should do. He was the program chairman of the local Lions Club, president of the 200-member Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and a board member for the local Boys Club. However, on a Sunday in May 1985, the family missed church for the first time in months. The aspiring millionaire spent the day struggling in vain to scrape together enough cash to salvage his business, his image, and his pride. At 11:30 that night, after the family went to bed, he laid out his insurance policies and then went into the garage. He got into his expensive, company-provided BMW and turned on the ignition. He was dead within minutes.

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man’s real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

The two lives described here depict two different faith systems. The millionaire, claiming to have faith in the God of the Bible, ultimately had placed his faith in things. When he

was in danger of losing them, he gave up on life itself. My friend who is renovating the old house is just about out of money. However, he is optimistic and excited about the ministry he is having in the lives of the students living there. He is aware of the financial difficulties that his dream presents, but he is trusting in God to provide even when good business sense may argue against it.

Could it be that many Christians have succumbed to the notion of rugged individualism, placing the building of an earthly empire above the building of God's kingdom? James 5:1-3 holds a severe warning for those tempted by wealth. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." God warns believers against placing their faith in things and treating people as expendable commodities.

The Sources of Materialism

In spite of both secular and religious messages against materialism in our culture, it still seems to have a great deal of influence on the lives of typical Americans. Why is this? I propose that there are two sources of materialism: philosophical materialism and functional materialism.

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think."{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they

have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, “We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.”{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

Survey after survey reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe that a God exists. If most Americans believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do they act like functional materialists? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? We could blame our modern society. The triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic components, often leaves little room for behavior motivated by a spiritual reality. However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

Every believer experiences a battle between the spirit and the flesh. In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Further, he warns the Galatians that people whose lives are filled with selfish ambition and envy, among other things, will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is not saying that one will lose his or her salvation, but that a life consumed by materialistic desires is probably devoid of a spiritual dimension. If the Holy Spirit is not evident, there is no regeneration and no salvation.

Jesus' ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of His ministry is highlighted by His experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt Him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the church, it is significant that at the beginning of Jesus' short ministry He was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word *tempt* to mean "to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness."{4} Jesus' fasting in the desert provides His followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It also provides a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan's testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

Satan's temptation is to reduce human nature to what might be called the *will to pleasure* principal, the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of

God'" (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the *will to pleasure* view of human nature with a *will to meaning* view. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive. In his personal struggle to survive a Nazi concentration camp, the psychologist Victor Frankl discovered that when men lost meaning they quickly died. Mankind needs a transcendent reason to continue striving against the struggles that life presents. It is the Word of God that provides the only true foundation for this struggle.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for *instant status*. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but He would lose His integrity. Jesus responds by declaring that we are not to put God to the test. We are not to presume that God will accept our plans with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

A Cuban pastor recently attended a conference in Dallas and noticed how people here often say that they have no time. He said that people in Cuba have relatively few things but rarely run out of time. This brings to mind the idea of opportunity cost. This rule from economics tells us that if we spend our resources on one thing we cannot use them on another. If our focus is on things, and our time is spent buying, using, fixing, and replacing them, do we really have time to build the relationships with people necessary to communicating the Gospel?

In his book *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Dr. Gene Getz suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for believers to be in bondage to things; we cannot serve both things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and the book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians also have to constantly be on guard against self-deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the church at Laodicea imagined itself self-sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

How then do Christians avoid materialism? The apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God’s kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples not to be absorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:34).

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God’s will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, “all the believers were one in heart and mind”(Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God’s kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God for the same today?

Notes

1. Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan: New York).
2. Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 61.
3. Israel Shenker, “The provocative progress of a pilgrim polymath,” *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 128.
4. Graham H. Twelftree, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*

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Conversation with a Muslim and a Christian

An e-mail conversation between a Christian (Don Closson) and an earnest Muslim revealed the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

It is always easier to deal with religious belief systems in the abstract. Cataloguing what a particular religion believes concerning the nature of God, human nature, salvation, and morality is usually a straightforward affair. Actually dialoguing with someone who holds to these beliefs can be far more interesting and challenging. So, although I possessed a general knowledge of what Islam teaches, I found that only by carrying on a long-term discussion with a Muslim did I gain a sense of the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah. A door was opened for me to experience some of the passion and zeal to be found in the Muslim evangelist. The discussion occurred via email, which muted some of the emotions that often accompany religious exchanges, but they still came through with considerable intensity.

The opportunity to carry on a discussion with a Muslim apologist arose when a campus minister asked if I would help respond to charges against the claims of Christianity being made by an Islamic leader at his school. I agreed, and soon

realized that a number of others, both Muslim and Christian would be listening in on our discussion. Once introduced to my Muslim counterpart, let's call him Ali, the interchange began quickly. I wish that I could report that at the end of our discussion Ali placed his faith in Christ. In fact, I don't think that I made much of an impact at all on his thinking. Ali, as with all of us, chooses what to accept as evidence. He refused to even attempt to see any of the issues we discussed from a Christian perspective. All I can do is pray that God might use our discussion down the road sometime, if God chooses to soften Ali's heart.

Over a six month period our discussion primarily focused on the person of Christ. Ali would ask questions and I would attempt to give an answer. I quickly realized that Ali's tactics and intentions were different from mine. He often used ridicule and intimidation in his responses and would pick and choose what to discuss and what to ignore, deciding when to move on to another topic in order to avoid really considering the material at hand. I have never considered myself a debater, I would much rather have a discussion with people who are really interested in the topic and graciously exchange viewpoints. If I were to enter another dialogue like the one with Ali, I would have to realize that I cannot assume that everyone thinks the way I do regarding dialogue across religious worldviews. The Bible tells us to be ready to give the reason for the hope that we have in Christ, and to do so with gentleness and respect. Don't assume the other person will follow the same rules.

Next we will look at the issue of the person of Jesus Christ from a Muslim perspective and begin to consider how one might make a biblical response.

Christological Mathematics

Since I had never spoken to a Muslim regarding the claims of Christianity, I was looking forward to the kinds of questions

that might be raised. I was not surprised that the first issue that came up was the nature of Jesus Christ, since this really is the heart of the matter. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, perhaps even a unique prophet, but not in any sense God. Ali got the conversation going by declaring that there was no place in the Bible that says that Jesus is both 100 percent God and 100 percent man. Along with this initial challenge Ali pointed out that he was very sensitive to proper interpretation and would be looking for incidents of verse twisting in order to make a passage say something that it actually doesn't.

I sent Ali a 2500 word essay that I had written earlier that contained multiple arguments for the deity of Christ and numerous biblical examples of Jesus saying and doing things that only make sense if He were indeed equal with God the Father. My response included indications of Christ's self-perception as God, as well as statements made by His disciples portraying their belief in His deity. I assumed that Christ's humanity was not the real issue. So I did not see a need to defend it. Ali's response was interesting. He noted that Muslims do indeed believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and performed many miracles, with the help of God. But then he stated, "From your response I think we both agree that the Bible does not claim that Jesus is both 100% God and 100% man." He later added, "If you don't have any verses to give us then let's move on to the next point."

At first I thought that Ali had not gotten my entire essay. How could he have missed my point? He reassured me that he had gotten it and then declared that since there is no verse that states the 100 percent deity and 100 percent humanity of Christ, we can go on. What I eventually realized was that he was demanding a single verse that actually declared a mathematical set of percentages for the mixture of deity and humanity in Christ. I was a bit surprised to say the least. When I asked for confirmation, he said that that was indeed

what he was looking for.

Most people know that the verse numbers in the Bible were added at a later date for convenience sake. After reminding Ali of passages like Philippians 2:6-7 and the first chapter of John, I asked him why it was necessary to find this complex truth in one verse. He ignored my question and responded by claiming victory that indeed, the Bible does not claim in one verse that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man, and he declared that we would now move on to the next point.

I must admit that I was a bit baffled, but not ready to concede the issue.

The Importance of Context

Ali's debating tactics might be called the "slash and burn" technique: never admit to using a weak argument and make good use of sarcasm to intimidate your opponent. He also likes to claim victory in the middle of an exchange of ideas and then declare that we are moving on to the next issue. However, before I moved on to his next question I tried once more to answer his first. All that got me was the charge that I was avoiding his second point. He wrote,

> You see Don, what you have done in your last email is you completely avoided this verse, and then you went looking in the Bible for other verses in which you think Jesus claimed to be God and gave them to us thinking that it would some how make us "forget" about John 5:30.

What about John 5:30? Jesus says; "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me." Ali claims that the verse shows that Jesus is inferior and helpless, that in fact He can do nothing. The key to this passage, as always, is in the context. I pointed out to Ali that in John 5:19-23 Jesus says that "He can do only what He sees His Father doing,

because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” Jesus raises the dead, has been given all judgment, and is to be given the same honor that the Father is given. Ali replied, “Great, this is what a messenger does, this doesn’t make him god.”

I pointed out to him that a messenger communicates on behalf of someone else. He does not claim to do what someone else does. Muhammad claimed to be a messenger of Allah, not to do what Allah does. In fact, Jesus didn’t claim to show the way as a messenger might, but He claimed that He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In fact, the same chapter says that the Jews recognized that Jesus was claiming equality with God the Father and tried all the harder to kill him (John 5:18). Ali might disagree with this claim, that Jesus is God, but that is exactly the argument that is being made by this chapter and the rest of the book of John.

Ali pulls verses from their context and refuses to deal with the entire passage. When given evidence from the chapter that contradicts his views, he changes the meanings of words and ridicules what he finds to be unreasonable. Next we will look at Ali’s rejection of the Trinity.

The Trinity

It is not surprising that Ali does not understand nor acknowledge the Trinitarian relationship between Jesus and the Father. Surah 4 verse 171 in the Qur’an calls on people of the book, Christians, not to commit excesses in their religion. It claims that Jesus was just a messenger of Allah and His Word, which was given to Mary. It literally tells Christians to “say not Trinity” for Allah is one. It is possible that Muhammad believed that the Trinity consisted of Jesus, the Father, and Mary. He rejected Jesus as the Son of God because he pictured Jesus as a physical offspring from a union of God the Father and Mary. This would commit the ultimate sin in the eyes of Islam, equating a physical thing with God the Creator (shirk).

Ali writes, “To say that Jesus is God or Son of God is not only a mockery of Godhood, but blasphemy of the lowest order and an insult to the intelligence of men.”

As a result, Ali alternates between denying that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God and ridiculing as illogical the notion the Jesus can be both God and man. He refuses to acknowledge the notion of the Trinity, even when it is the best way to bring together difficult passages. When enough evidence is given that the Bible does teach that Jesus is both God and man, admittedly a difficult concept, Muslims reject the Bible as having been corrupted. They really have no other choice since the Qur’an specifically rejects the Trinity. It literally comes down to either rejecting their prophet Muhammad or accepting the validity and message of the Bible.

An interesting side note to this discussion is that Ali’s position is very similar to believers of other religious groups who respect Jesus but reject Christianity. Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that the Bible was corrupted following the passing of the apostles, and that they now have its correct interpretation, as do Mormons and the Baha’is, an offshoot of Islam. Mormons claim that their prophet Joseph Smith received their view of Jesus, found in the Book of Mormon, from the angel Moroni. Muhammad claimed to have received the Qur’an from the angel Gabriel. It is obvious that all of these revelations cannot be true as they each give us a very different Jesus. Paul has something to say about these different gospels. He writes to the church in Galatia:

> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-8)

A Difficult Decision

As I mentioned earlier, the outcome of the six-month interchange was neither a conversion, nor even a congenial agree-to-disagree ending. In fact, I ended the dialogue after realizing that continuing the exchange could profit little and that my time might be better spent elsewhere. I must add that this was not an easy decision to make. I wondered whether I had given up too easily or had somehow not communicated adequately the hope that I have in Christ.

However, any hesitation to end the conversation was erased when I received a reply to my note to terminate the exchange. Ali told me that I could not quit. That in fact, he would announce on various web sites that both I and Probe Ministries had nothing to say regarding the reliability of the Bible if I did not respond to his challenges. This confirmed to me that Ali was simply using me to gain access to a larger audience in order to get out his message. He had no interest in a real discussion where ideas are considered and a minimal amount of graciousness exists.

I went back to the Scriptures to see how Jesus handled such people and what He taught His followers to do when they encountered ears that would not hear. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus told his apostles that, "[I]f any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." The meaning communicated was that those who reject the gospel must now answer for themselves. When the gospel is taught, it brings both judgment and salvation.

In Matthew 7:6 Jesus tells the apostles, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." Dogs and pigs do not signify any specific race or ethnic group. Jesus is teaching that those who have treated the gospel with scorn and clearly rejected the salvation it

offers and have been hardened by their contempt are to be avoided.

When Paul and Timothy were opposed by the Jews, who became abusive, the book of Acts (18:5) records, “[H]e shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility.'”

I get little pleasure from reading these passages. I wanted to change Ali’s mind. However, when I told Ali that I was praying for him, he replied, “Don’t preach to me, prove it to me.” Given that he had ignored much evidence already, it told me that his ears were closed. However, I will continue to pray that God will soften Ali’s heart and that one day he might have ears to hear the Gospel.

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