

# How to Kill Sin: John Owen's The Mortification of Sin

*Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen's classic book The Mortification of Sin.*

## Introduction

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an ongoing battle with sin. He suggested I read John Owen's book, *The Mortification of Sin*[\[1\]](#). I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen's key insights in the battle against sin.



Let's begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, "mort-" or "mors" means death. *Mortificare*—to kill.[\[2\]](#) Other examples of this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists "shame" and "humiliation" as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill *sin*. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It's only appropriate if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don't sit here and read

another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you're reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and you're ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you're still reading, then let's press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.

## **What is Mortification?**

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill. . .sin. That's what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That's why this is a big deal. That's why this matters. That's also why sin's presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that "[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death."[3](#)

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real

option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before.[{4}](#) So until then we mortify sin.[{5}](#)

Now let's talk about mortification. Let's talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen's instruction is clear: "utterly destroy it" or, make it cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.[{6}](#)

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires," as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn't merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus' strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let's talk about how not to mortify sin.

## How NOT to Mortify Sin

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death. [\[7\]](#)

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.

Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you're tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged

pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year’s resolution. You can force the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you’ve resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it’s merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

## How to Mortify Sin

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don’t it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here’s the bad news, though. *You* can’t mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don’t despair! This doesn’t mean you can’t experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God’s will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something *you* do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh. Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen’s words. “Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet.”[\[8\]](#)

The way to mortify sin is to set *faith* at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross.

His sacrifice is your remedy. That's how you kill sin—you don't. You believe in the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It's freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don't. Owen goes on to add two more points of substance. First "fill your soul" with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.

The second point is to *expect* relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ's blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect it's going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who's been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It's a slow and difficult, often *painful* process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don't. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

## **Conclusion**

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don't it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death. Owen's book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the "soul and substance of all false religion in

the world.”{9}

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you're trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

“Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin.”{10}  
You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus' promise in that struggle: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”{11}

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.{12} He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

## Notes

1. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House), 1996.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000.
3. James 1:15.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.

5. Colossians 3:5.
6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
8. Owen, p.161.
9. Ibid., p.23.
10. Ibid., p.161.
11. John 16:33.
12. Psalm 139:14.

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## 3 Points About Christmas: Evidence for Biblical Truth

*Paul Rutherford suggests using three fulfilled biblical prophecies as an apologetic for biblical truth: Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His birth.*

Pine scent inside my home, the quick defensive tightening of my skin as I walk outside into the cold brisk air, and then the reflexive opposite – the slow relaxation of my whole body as I stand in front of a fire warming myself.

These experiences during the holidays warm my heart.



As we look toward Christmas and hear the nativity story this season, I want to share with you one conversation starter I use to defend my faith.



Let me share it with you. It's rather simple. It's easy to remember because it comes entirely out of Matthew's second chapter. It's not long and involved either—just three points.

Skeptics ridicule the Bible for its many supposed “errors,” “holes,” and “inconsistencies.” They conclude that it's unreliable. Sharing this quick three-point apologetic can assure them that the Bible is reliable and can be trusted.

If the Bible makes three prophecies and then records the fulfillments of those prophecies, don't you think that makes the book at least a little bit credible? That's what you can do citing just the Christmas story from Matthew 2.

You might be tempted to dismiss this, saying it doesn't matter. But here's why the reliability of Scripture matters. IF Scripture can be trusted, AND what it is says is true, then some of the recorded teachings of Jesus could radically alter your life.

In Matthew 10:13 Jesus said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Or Luke 14:27, “Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.”

Does that mean the disciple of Jesus has to lose his life?!! In a sense, yes.

How's that for radical?! If the Bible is reliable, then that means your life is at stake. Literally. That's not exaggeration: your physical life and your spiritual life. Both.

So there's a lot at stake then, if what the Bible says is true. Let's take a look, then, shall we?

Matthew's account of the Christmas story records three distinct fulfillments of prophecy: Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His

birth. We'll consider these one at a time.

## **Jesus Born in Bethlehem**

Your life hangs in the balance of the Bible's reliability. That's why this discussion matters—whether or not the Bible is reliable. The Christmas story from Matthew 2 offers strong evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we get into the first of three instances in the Christmas story that point to the miraculous fulfillment of prophecy strictly surrounding Jesus' birth—namely the location of His birth, Bethlehem.

The gospel writer, Matthew, begins chapter two telling the story of the Magi—the fabled wise men from the East who came to worship the King of the Jews. They arrive in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital city, expecting to find the baby King. They are disappointed, but redirected to Bethlehem by King Herod's chief priests. Why? Because those priests had read the prophet Micah who foretold the Messiah, the coming King, would come out of Bethlehem.

In Matthew 2:6, the writer is quoting the prophet Micah 5:2.

You may have known Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That's a pretty widely known fact, which is also why it's a great place to start this conversation to make a case for the Bible's reliability. It might sound like this.

“You know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, right?” you could begin. “Well, did you know that was prophesied hundreds of years prior?” Don't worry about trying to remember the citation. Just focus on it being fulfilled prophecy. You can always look up the reference later if you want to. If you want extra credit, go for the prophet's name, Micah.

Some skeptics may grant that Jesus indeed fulfilled prophecy, but that he did so intentionally. That is, skeptics basically

charge Jesus with reading the Hebrew prophets, and then deliberately fulfilling as many as he possibly could in order to win favor, influence, and gain a following.

However, this is difficult to achieve when you haven't been born yet! How could he possibly have deliberately fulfilled anything when he wasn't deliberating anything at all? He wasn't conscious, and didn't even exist yet in the flesh.

So no, Jesus could not have fulfilled this prophecy by Himself in order to deceive and manipulate. What are the chances Jesus' birthplace would fulfill prophecy? Not likely!

## **Jesus' Flight to Egypt**

The second fulfillment of prophecy recorded in Matthew 2 (the Christmas story), is Jesus' flight to Egypt. Practically overnight Jesus' father, Joseph, moves his family out of the country—out of Israel and into Egypt. Here's the text. Matthew 2:14-15.

“So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”

International travel back then was not what it is today. Modern conveniences ease travel today and increase comfort, yet it still remains difficult for us. Joseph and Mary, however, risked their very lives in order to relocate internationally. This effort was not undertaken lightly. Joseph was, after all, under orders from an angel.

Question: what do you think are the chances an ancient near-eastern middle-class laborer would embark upon world travel with only a moment's notice? He risked the life of his fiancée. He risked the life of his (adoptive) child, not to mention his own. This kind of journey was highly unusual. So

it seems unlikely this scenario would have played out under other circumstances—that it was mere coincidence to fulfill prophecy.

When compared to non-biblical prophecy, this one seems awfully specific. It names the country out of which he is called—Egypt—not something vague like “foreign country.” No. The prophet Hosea mentions Egypt specifically in chapter 11:1. Further it mentions the gender of the child—a male child, a son.

The specificity of the prophecy and the unlikely nature of the event occurring on its own both point to divine orchestration. This was no accident. The fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus’ birth make the Bible seem a lot more reliable.

Your life is in the balance of the Bible’s reliability. The teachings recorded in this book can save your life. The bigger question is, will you believe them? Do you want to be saved? Do you believe Jesus is Lord and accept His sacrifice on the cross to save you from sin? (If so, please email me at [paul@probe.org](mailto:paul@probe.org).) I want to hear from you.

## **Jesus, Genocide Survivor**

Three fulfilled prophecies recorded by Matthew chapter two—in the Christmas story—underscore the reliability of this controversial ancient text. The Christmas story is evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we consider the third prophecy Jesus’ birth story fulfills: namely, that there would be a genocide killing babies. Here’s the text from Matthew 2:16-18.

“Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the

prophet was fulfilled: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.'"

The gospel writer, Matthew, is quoting a prophecy of Jeremiah. To decode this passage, first keep in mind that Rachel, Jacob's wife, was mother to Israel's twelve tribes, and here she is a kind of symbolic mother for all of Israel. The second point to note is that Ramah is located in Bethlehem.

With that in mind, the prophecy foretells of Israel's mothers crying in Bethlehem, mourning the loss of their children. The author draws our attention to the amazing accuracy of this prophecy. Not only does he get right the who and the what—the moms and their weeping because of the lost babies, but he also correctly prophesies the small village! Incredible.

What are the chances Jesus would fulfill this prophecy this specifically? And as we discussed before, if Jesus were no more than a charlatan attempting to self-fulfill these prophecies, how could a man orchestrate something as large-scale as the death of all the baby boys in a village? Plus the Bible records that was Herod's idea. And remember, Herod didn't want Jesus around. Herod was attempting to eliminate potential competition for his throne.

The genocide ordered by the Jewish king, an event that is part of the Christmas story of Jesus' birth, fulfills prophecy. In so doing it shows the Bible is reliable. That's a big deal because the Bible records the story of a very important man—one whom you need to know: Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

We've been discussing how the Christmas story indicates the Bible is true. We've done that by considering three instances recorded in Matthew 2 that fulfill Old Testament prophecy.

First, the prophet Micah prophesied the coming Ruler would

come out of Bethlehem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1 records that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Second, the prophet Hosea prophesied that the Messiah would be called out of Egypt. Jesus' father Joseph moved infant Jesus to Egypt to flee the coming baby genocide. When it was safe, Joseph was instructed in a dream to return. So Jesus was called out of Egypt. (Matthew 2:14)

Then thirdly, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied all the mothers in Bethlehem would mourn the loss of their children. Matthew 2:16 records that after King Herod learns the news of Jesus' birth, he orders all infant boys in Bethlehem killed.

What are the chances of one man fulfilling ALL of those prophecies? Not likely! If you want more, read Josh McDowell's book *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. He records 61 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. In it he quotes professor Peter Stoner who calculated the probability of Jesus fulfilling just eight prophecies. He illustrates the likelihood this way. Cover the state of Texas in two feet of silver dollars. Mark just one silver dollar. Now choose one silver dollar at random from anywhere in the state. The chances of picking up the marked silver dollar on the first try are the same as Jesus fulfilling just eight Old Testament prophecies. Not happening!

We have good evidence that what the Bible records is accurate. It will stand up to criticism that Jesus attempted to fulfill prophecy on his own, to position himself as a teacher with authority, influence, or to gain a following. But the fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy we discussed cannot be intentionally self-fulfilled. They either occurred before He was born, or were entirely out of His control.

Do you now believe in Jesus because you listened to this? Email me. I'd love to hear from you ([paul@probe.org](mailto:paul@probe.org)). Are you already His disciple? God has a unique purpose for your life, only you can fulfill. You are his ambassador. Share the good

news. Your life is not the only one at stake. Your neighbor's is too. Have you shared with him or her yet? Take your next step of faithfulness today, whatever that is. I am praying you do.

You now have a great conversation starter to help you get there. The Christmas story is tremendous evidence for biblical truth.

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## **Vanguard November 2017**



### **Vanguard: Fall 2017 News for Our Donors**

#### **He Followed the Evidence**

Paul Rutherford



Selfie taken by Van this Summer

Van was born in Vietnam. He's an atheist who always told himself he'd follow the truth wherever it led. But when he discovered a wealth of evidence this Spring for the resurrection of Jesus, would his resolve be enough to forsake the only life he'd ever known?

Meet Van. He recently graduated from the University of Texas at Dallas with a degree in finance. He's a quiet and studious young man who grew up in a good family just outside Dallas. His parents immigrated to the States from Vietnam when he was young to live the American dream. Van thought of himself an atheist even though his background was Buddhist.

Van considered himself a student of truth from a young age. Early on he determined to follow the evidence even if it led to a completely different life. In high school he debated a friend and fellow classmate on the existence of God. And through it he gained a respect for the voice of Christians in conversations about our origins and where everything came from. He decided to read the Bible for himself.

This past year Van's best friend (a Christian) began displaying symptoms of a mental illness. Van felt bad for his friend. Sadly his friend's condition worsened until he withdrew from school. Van was disheartened. He witnessed first-hand a Christian struggle in his soul, while depending



on Christ. It was different. Van knew Christ could be the only way his friend was getting through such an impossible situation.

Van's friend was suffering. And he knew that Jesus also suffered. Suddenly Van began to see his friend as looking like Jesus. Van was very shaken up – spiritually speaking.

The week before this Easter, Van ran into Probe staffer Byron Barlowe at a booth on campus having conversations about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Byron and Van discussed the resurrection and some alternate theories as well. Van was overwhelmed. He thought the resurrection made sense. But he told Byron, "There's something missing."

Byron answered. "What's missing is answered by the question, 'Does Christ dying on the cross and rising again have anything to do with you and paying for your sins?'" Van took Byron's number. Then he walked away thoughtfully.

Later that week Van texted Byron. "I now believe."

They've been meeting since then to study the Bible, so Van can grow in his new found faith.

That could NOT have happened without you. Van is in the Kingdom of God because you gave. Thank you. Your support is essential to writing incredible stories like Van's. Thank you for giving. Thank you for praying. Thank you for making this ministry happen. You are the secret to ministry success! Thank you.

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## **Is Probe Ministries a Hate Group? A Response to the SPLC**

Sue Bohlin

CNN recently released a map of the US showing the hate groups identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Probe has been on that list as an “anti-LGBT hate group” for two years. The reasons the SPLC gave a reporter for including us were patently untrue, accusing us of saying things we don’t say and don’t believe. It is mainly my writings on LGBT issues they object to. But they wouldn’t even talk to me.



We were tagged an “anti-LGBT” hate group because we don’t agree with the LGBT agenda. We align ourselves with the Bible’s standards. We believe God designed marriage between one man and one woman, and that all sex outside of marriage violates God’s good design for human sexuality. Unfortunately, these days mere disagreement is called hate. I have repeatedly invited people to identify the hate-filled words on our website so I can change them, but no one has ever identified any. I believe that is because you won’t find words of hate on our website or in any of our recorded messages.

I’m the primary writer and speaker about homosexuality and gender issues for Probe. It might be helpful for you to know that for 18 years I have also served with Living Hope Ministries, which helps people deal with unwanted homosexuality, and also serves the family members of those who have chosen to embrace a gay identity. I have walked with a lot of women as they process the reasons for their attractions and experience a shift in their beliefs and attitudes (and sometimes attractions as well, though not always). They are so very dear to me, and I love being their cheerleader and encourager.

As my pastor says, “Truth sounds like hate to those who hate the truth.” There are so many cultural lies about God’s design

for sex and identity that when we proclaim God's truth in a culture that embraces lies, we get called hateful and discriminatory.

Probe is all about helping people think biblically about a wide range of topics. We offer biblical truth – even when it's unpopular.

We are grateful for how your support of Probe allows us to continue to proclaim God's truth about gender, marriage and sexuality in an increasingly dark and hostile world.

So no, we're not a hate group. We're a *truth* group, seeking to speak the truth in love. And truth haters are gonna hate.

[Editor's note: Just this month the Department of Defense dropped citations to the SPLC's hate group listings in its training manual – a big win!]

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## **Culturally Captive No More: Kei'Aysha's Story**

Paul Rutherford



Kei'Aysha, *Mind Games*

**DENTON, Texas.** I sat down with *Mind Games* 2017 camper Kei'Aysha to ask about her experience that week. Her story is incredible. Let me share it with you in her own words. Here's an edited transcript.

**Paul:** Tell me about your experience at *Mind Games*.

**Kei'Aysha:** Well I've come here from Georgia hoping to learn and grow. And I have. It's been very encouraging. I've loved it. Before I came here I didn't understand how to defend my faith. But now I do.

**Paul:** Wow. That's fantastic! Tell me, what's a belief you thought to be true before, but now you realize it's not true.

**Kei'Aysha:** Before I became a Christian I used to believe in reincarnation. And I used to believe in evolution. But now I realize God designed all living things. Not that there isn't microevolution. But God created the Earth and all of life.

**Paul:** Would you recommend *Mind Games* to others?

**Kei'Aysha:** YES! (smiling) It changed my life! Before I didn't understand how to explain things to people. Like, on the first day (Dr.) Ray asked why we are Christians. I learned how to say why I'm a Christian without saying, well I just believe, or I just have faith. I can say I'm a Christian because I'm convinced by the evidence from creation (motioning all around her).

**Paul:** How has *Mind Games* impacted your faith?

**Kei'Aysha:** My faith is much stronger now – much stronger.

Thank you for changing Kei'Aysha's life. You've probably heard the statistics. The majority of the American Church is culturally captive – their beliefs about God, Jesus, truth, the Bible, etc. align more closely with culture than with the

teachings of the Bible. Kei'Aysha was one of those statistics. She already believed in Jesus for salvation. But now she believes biblically about what happens after death, and how the Earth was created, because of you.

You made that possible. Thank you. The impact of this experience for Kei'Aysha will bless her the rest of her life. She now has confidence in life after the grave. It's in Christ – not her works here on earth. She now believes in the Creator God – maker of heaven and earth. She is being freed from the bonds of captivity to culture. She's not captive to that anymore thanks to you. Kei'Aysha is thinking biblically now more than she was before. Amazing.

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## Sign of the Times

Kerby Anderson, President



As hard as it might be to believe, the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated Probe Ministries as a “hate group.” Sadly, that puts us right along with the KKK, the neo-Nazi's, white supremacists, and Muslim terrorists. You can find more information on page two. I want to tell you what this whole thing *means*.

We earned our “hate group” status (according to them) for promoting the traditional and biblical stance on human sexuality. Let's be real clear on what's happening here. This is historic. A legitimate, grace-filled, Christian ministry in America has been labeled a hate group for what reason? Teaching the Bible.

The prophet Isaiah (5:20) writes, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil.” This is a result of culture shifting little by little over many years. This is a result of cultural captivity, the result of a weak anemic church that looks no

different from our culture. We have not loved our neighbor courageously or graciously as Jesus did. This is the primary reason our culture's in this whole mess.

But it's not too late!

That is why I am so glad for you. You are one of the few who get it. Your prayers, your gifts, your support is taking action to stand up and *be* the Church.

Our culture needs more ambassadors for Christ. Will you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind?

We don't need more *hearers* of the word. We need more *doers*. And that's exactly what you're doing – training more believers with confidence to be ambassadors for Christ. You're training more doers. And for those who are captive to culture, you're freeing them with God's glorious truth fulfilling God's created purpose for their life and yours. You are training more doers of the word. Thank you.

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## **“Is It OK for Christians to Dance?”**

**What about Christians and dancing. Is it OK to dance?**

Well generally I say yes, within reason.

First, I see no specific prohibition against it in the Scriptures. That means it is an area of freedom for us as believers in Christ. Now as Paul discussed our freedoms in

Christ in Romans, Galatians, and Corinthians, we exercise our freedoms IN Christ. That is to say to His glory, with all appropriate considerations due. Does it edify? Does it offend others? Will it serve my witness for Christ or hinder it?

As with all choices, examining one's motive is essential. If someone dances in order to arouse and seduce a person they're not married to, that would be wrong. (There *is* a place for that kind of dance, in the privacy of a married couple's bedroom, per the Song of Solomon.) The way one dresses while dancing matters too; a number of people can't watch *Dancing With the Stars* because of the revealing costumes.

Further, we want to consider what kind of dancing is in view. I take my wife swing dancing and country dancing from time to time. We find it great exercise, a fun way to express ourselves and get to know each other better. Further it is an expression of art. That glorifies God doesn't it?

Last, we have examples in the Bible of those who danced. David is probably the most famous, but there are others.

If you want to read more, consider this article by Probe founder Jimmy Williams: [The Christian and the Arts](#).

It is a more broad examination of the believer to the arts in general – as you can see by the title. But there is a section on music and dance. It should help, I think, in getting you in a good framework from which to approach the question for yourself.

Thanks for writing!

At your service,

Paul Rutherford  
Research Associate

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## Is Jesus the Only Way?

*Paul Rutherford explains why Jesus is the only way to know God.*



I was sitting in my car at a red light and I saw a bumper sticker on the car in front of me that said, "Coexist." Only, the letters on the bumper sticker are religious symbols. A crescent stands in place of the letter "c," a peace symbol in place of the letter "o," and some of the other symbols included a cross, a Star of David, and a yin-yang, all used to create the word "coexist."

Perhaps you've seen an image just like this bumper sticker, but on a t-shirt or tattoo. It represents a common sentiment in our culture that everyone should get along, or coexist peacefully. And I love that sentiment. We *should* get along. In fact, I'm grateful to God I live in a country in which an unprecedented number of people from all different religions, backgrounds, and ethnicities do, in fact, coexist every day,



and for the most part without violent protest. The life we enjoy in the United States is historically unprecedented.



But the coexistence advocated in *this* bumper sticker is something more subtle. It's a way of getting along that is more than meets the eye. It frequently calls for a peaceable lifestyle free of conflict between faiths. People hope that we can all unite in a single brotherhood and celebrate our differences, particularly religious ones. They don't understand why we bicker over who's right and who's wrong.

The call to coexist is a reaction to the exclusive truth claims of religion, especially Christianity. In fact, its exclusivism is the most offensive aspect of Christianity today. "Repent. Believe. Come to Jesus. He's the only way!" These are phrases easily associated with Christianity, especially street preaching. What should we do with Christianity's exclusivism in a twenty-first century cosmopolitan society? Haven't we progressed beyond such narrow-mindedness in these modern times? Isn't claiming Jesus as the only way intolerant of other faiths? Don't those Christians know all religions are equally valid paths to heaven? They shouldn't force their beliefs on others!

Claiming Jesus is the only way to heaven *is* exclusive, I admit. It says there is no other way to God except by trust in Jesus Christ. Jesus most famously says this Himself in the Bible: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).

Even though it's offensive, I believe Jesus really is the only way to God. In this article we're going to explore that question by discussing objections to it, and discover why He

really *is* the only way.

## Tolerance

As believers, when we claim Jesus is the only way, you often hear people give some variation of, “That’s so intolerant!” In doing so, they reject the claim. Often implied, but not said straight out, is the demand that the Christian “tolerate” others’ beliefs, or take back what he just said.

It’s worth pointing out that claiming Christianity to be intolerant is itself an intolerant claim. But the notion of [tolerance](#) is complex and has a long history. And rather than elaborate that contradiction, let’s begin by exploring the complexity of tolerance.

What’s usually meant by tolerance these days is including beliefs that include all others. This position generally rejects Jesus as the only way because diversity and equality are now celebrated as the highest values. “Tolerance” celebrates differences of religions and equality of opportunity to practice them. To claim Jesus is the only way squelches both equality and diversity by claiming only one religion is right. Since squelching diversity and equality are socially unacceptable, the exclusivity of Jesus isn’t tolerated.

But this issue is complex. (That might be apparent already.) Truth and tolerance are actually linked. In fact, tolerance relies on truth. In the book *The Truth about Tolerance*, David Couchman says, “If there is no real truth, there is no reason for me to be tolerant. Without some kind of beliefs which cause me to value you as a person, even though I disagree with you, why should I be tolerant towards you?”<sup>{1}</sup> For tolerance to exist at all, it relies upon a framework of truth. That resonates with an idea mentioned earlier, how intolerance contradicts itself.

But the rabbit hole goes even deeper. Truth also relies upon tolerance. “[I]t is also the case that truth as a reflective goal for individuals and communities. . .needs a context of right-minded toleration to flourish in.”<sup>{2}</sup> Without tolerance, truth likewise becomes the hammer of oppression. We find then that truth and tolerance go hand in hand.

Nevertheless, tolerance is the hammer of choice in culture today. Too often suppression of Christians sharing the truth that Jesus is the only way of salvation is justified in the name of tolerance. Don't be taken captive by this distortion. Genuine tolerance acknowledges all positions, even those that are exclusive. A biblical worldview holds only one truth, Jesus is the only path to heaven, while maintaining respect and dignity for those who disagree. That's genuine tolerance.

## **Absolutes Don't Exist**

Here is another objection you might hear: Christians can't claim Jesus is the only way because there are no [absolutes](#). What Christians claim is an absolute truth. And there simply *are* no absolute truths.

Their justification goes like this. We know from study, from reason, from the postmodern era, that society has moved beyond absolutes. There is no absolute truth. There is no overarching metanarrative (or idea of truth) which can transcend culture, nation, or time. Truth is a construct created by each man, each culture, and bound by the strictures of the time in which it was created.

This objection shares a similar weakness to the tolerance objection. Denying absolutes is also self-defeating. It contradicts itself. If we were to ask this objector if she really believed what she was saying was true, we could ask her, “You believe no absolute truth exists, right? Are you absolutely sure of that?” This objector would have to agree.

That's what the position holds, thus contradicting her own claim.

This objection often comes out of the postmodern school of thought, which says there is no such thing as objective truth, such as  $2 + 2$  always equals 4. Postmodern thought also denies the meaningfulness of history along with the ability to interpret literature in a unified and meaningful way. The unfortunate consequence is that we're left with a bleak reality stripped of purpose or meaning, which frankly, isn't very appealing. Without truth, meaning, history, or purpose, what's the point?

The great irony of it all is that postmodern thought arrives at its conclusions by way of reason, which it then concludes isn't true, and then holds it in contempt. It calls into question reason itself and the whole Enlightenment project along with it. So there's a healthy dose of despair that frequently accompanies adherents to postmodern thought, including our friends who don't believe Jesus can be the only way to God because there are no absolutes. But that's the lie to which I don't want you to be taken captive. Jesus really is the only way. He's the only way to find peace in a wrecked world. He is meaning for a confused life. And He leads us home to heaven out of a world where we don't belong. The remedy to that despair is Jesus.

Despair at the failure of reason to improve mankind is the sad but ultimate end of every god which usurps the rightful place of the one true God: Jesus Christ. The truth is, all gods fail, disappoint, and leave us desperate. The only one who is faithful is Jesus. (cf. Deut. 7:9; 2 Thess. 3:3) But we won't find that satisfaction until we rest assured in the truth that Jesus really is the only way.

# Pluralism

There is another category of objectors to Christ's claim to exclusivity. A difficult but less in-your-face objection is pluralism. [Pluralism](#) is the belief that any variety of beliefs and values are all equally true and valid.

When I claim Jesus is the only way, some calmly object. Pluralists tend to be more laid-back. Typically they affirm my right to follow Christ, even celebrate it. These folks calmly share their belief that all religions are right: they all lead to god. Often they cite the Eastern proverb that there are many paths to the top of the mountain.

First, I'd like to point out that pluralism is intellectually lazy. It doesn't take seriously the law of non-contradiction. (This law says that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time and in the same way.) When a Christian claims the path is exclusive, that Jesus is the only way, the pluralist might think, "That's nice, but actually, I know that all religions lead to heaven." He doesn't accept the Christian's position as true. He says he believes Christianity is true while at the same time denying its central tenet, which is that Jesus is the only way.

But this response is not unique to Christianity. A conservative Jew sincere about his faith won't say any path leads to heaven; neither will a Sunni Muslim. Pluralism attempts to make peace where there is none, and only succeeds in agreeing with no one.

Second, Christians who hold to exclusivism are sometimes falsely accused of pushing their beliefs on others. In condemning the exclusivist claims of Christianity, the pluralist imposes *her* beliefs on the Christian. It contradicts the very intended principle.

We all have beliefs or actions we want others to take

seriously. There's nothing wrong with that. From my experience, pluralism is usually based on fear, which is completely understandable. The other person disagrees but fears conflict. They fear the relationship might be at stake if they express their true belief. As believers we still accept and honor people even if they don't agree with us. This is how we alleviate fear, demonstrating acceptance for those with whom we disagree. (And that's the true meaning of tolerance, by the way.)

When someone throws up this smokescreen in conversation, it can feel scary—alarming. Suddenly, the person you're talking to gets defensive. We can wonder, "Where did this come from?" In that moment it's probably not wise to press. Ask them why they believe that way, or affirm them. Certainly no one has a right to force compliance on another unwillingly. Communicate that we don't have to agree to be accepted. Further, don't fall prey to this area where culture takes many believers captive. Jesus is the only way. Stand fast.

## **The Only Way**

Is Jesus the only way? Yes. Multiple scriptures teach this truth. Let's consider a few.

Matthew 11:27 says, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus is claiming that God his Father has handed everything over to Him. This is an indirect claim to be God Himself. But Jesus also makes it clear He is the only one, since no one knows the Father but the Son.

Let's also consider John's gospel. Before Jesus even began his ministry John the Baptist responds to Jesus' identity. "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

In Hebrew culture at the time, calling someone the Lamb of God was a claim to the Messiah who was prophesied (Isaiah 53:7). Further, only God has the power to take away sin. This was an unmistakable claim to divinity. It's interesting also that Jesus doesn't correct him, or deny Godhood. On the contrary, a short time later, Jesus picks up his first two disciples and encourages them, saying, "Come and you will see" (John 1:39).

It's one thing to claim divinity and yet another to claim to be the *only* divinity. So, where does the Bible say Jesus is the only way? As we mentioned earlier, by Jesus' own admission He is the only way to God in John 14:6—"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Peter also explains the meaning of Jesus' exclusivity in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Believers, take heart. Jesus Christ is the one and only way. Questioning Jesus' exclusivity is a recent historical phenomenon. That question is commonly asked in the 20th century West, a culture increasingly influenced by postmodern thinking and multiculturalism. Take courage. We who accept the exclusivity of Christ are in a historical majority. Repudiation for Christians as being intolerant, exclusive, or uneducated is a recent occurrence. These are the current trends of our culture. Don't be taken captive. Jesus is the only way.

## Notes

1. David Couchman, quoted in *The Truth about Tolerance*, Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 75.
2. Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, *The Truth about Tolerance*, (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 75.

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# What Is Apologetics?

*Four Probe staffers answer the question, “What is apologetics?” from their own experience and understanding.*

Apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith, generally speaking. That’s the definition of the word. But, that’s about the extent of the agreement among Christian apologists. From this point on begin many differences.

Many well informed Christians define apologetics differently. When it comes to *how* we defend the faith, there is a lot of discussion on the best method. When it comes to *why* we do apologetics many disagree. Thoughtful Christians do not agree on the best place from which to begin defending our historic Christian faith, and we certainly don’t all agree on who apologetics is for, that is, who is the intended recipient or beneficiary of our defense of Christianity.



However, as we begin a discussion on these questions, it is important to keep in mind these differences occur among faithful Christians, sincere believers, and are well intended. So these differences are not a salvation issue—that’s about faith in Christ. Airing out these differences then, is a fulfillment of Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” It is our hope and expectation as the writers therefore, that all Christians will be edified by this discussion whether they have walked with Christ for thirty years or thirty days.

In this article, we’re going to hear from several Probe staffers answering the question, “What is apologetics?”

So, you Probe fans are going to get to know us Probe staff



better. First-time readers, I hope you consider a perspective you may not have considered before. And for all of us, I hope that by considering these different perspectives, we all grow in the way we defend our faith, and carry out the charge from 1 Peter 3:15. That's the passage of Scripture from which we derive our English word "apologetics." It says, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

Regardless of how we define apologetics, we are all still called to defend our faith. The point of this discussion is not the discussion itself. The point is to equip us by the Spirit in the action of defending our faith, as we obey the call of our one common Lord Jesus Christ.



**Dr. Ray Bohlin**

In this article you will become well-acquainted with the idea that apologetics basically means defending the gospel or defending the faith. That is how I have always understood apologetics. But in my nearly forty years with Probe Ministries I understand that my "defense" goes in two directions and I believe that to be the case for every believer.

Apologetics was instrumental in my initial profession of faith while a college student at the University of Illinois. Though I was raised in a religious home, it was primarily a religion of duty and performance. But in my second year of college I became aware that there was real evidence that the gospels could be trusted and that Jesus was a real person who lived and died in early first century Israel. That made a huge difference in my willingness to consider Jesus that was never there before.

That was just over forty years ago, and evidences for the truth of the history of the Bible have always held a unique place in my thinking. As one trained as a scientist, I learned that data or evidence meant everything. Ideas are fine in science but if you can't support your ideas with evidence, you're wasting your time. Therefore, finding real evidence for my faith put my own thoughts on solid ground. So it can be for every believer. We all struggle with trust in God and in His love for us. But if we are able to see that God fulfills prophecy, that His Word is trustworthy in every respect, then we find it easier to trust Him with our lives.

The other direction for my defense of the faith is outward to other believers who have real questions and find themselves stuck in their walk with God. Their mind is full of doubts about God, Creation, and redemption. While I make it clear that I cannot prove that God exists, I can string together evidences from science and philosophy to demonstrate that belief in God as Creator is quite reasonable. And if the best evidence demonstrates that Jesus physically and historically rose from the dead, then everything He said can be trusted as well.

This also applies to unbelievers who come with honest questions. Those outside the church have many reasons for not believing that this rather fantastic story is true. Especially when it all happened two thousand years ago! There are definitely some unbelievers who ask their questions only to avoid getting down to business about Jesus. But initially, we can't judge a person's heart or motive. When we take those questions and doubts seriously and respond with gentleness and respect, both our manner and our answers can be used by the Spirit to draw someone to the Father.



**Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese**

Apologetics is the most misunderstood word in the Church today! Average church-goers relegate it to a side category of their minds as a hobby horse for those "smart" Christians who are too cerebral and not practical enough. Apologetics appears to them as the playground of theologians, far removed from the lay Christian who thinks the true gospel ministry consists of "just preaching the Word" irrespective of the Church's cultural setting.

Theologians contribute to the popular aversion to apologetics through misrepresenting the discipline as a branch of theology that seeks to give a rational justification to the claims of Christianity that is theoretical in nature as opposed to practical. Others separate apologetics entirely from theology: "If theology is the queen of the sciences, apologetics is her handmaid." This is the Rationalist approach.

All theology is apologetics. The term *apologetic theology* distinguishes it from the Rationalist approach. It stresses the relevance of the gospel to the philosophical needs of a given culture, creating a synthesis. One definition states that "systematic theology is 'answering theology.' It must answer the questions implied in the general human condition and special historical situation. Apologetics, therefore, is an omnipresent element and not a special section of systematic theology." Apologetic theology supplies answers from revelation to the ultimate questions of a given social context, such as "What is the meaning of life?"

Apologetic theology maintains the integrity of the two poles of message and audience. It must never compromise the essential meaning of the gospel, nor can it neglect the spiritual needs of the society it wishes to reach through ignoring or ridiculing whatever ultimate questions it presents.

All theology is apologetics, and by extension all that the Church does is apologetically oriented. The adaptation of

contemporary music in the worship service demonstrates an apologetic theology that takes the traditional message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and makes it resonant with the cultural needs of the younger generation. The same may be said with the use of film or any artistic, religious or philosophical expression. For example the 2013 Superman movie *Man of Steel* retells the story of Christ in modern allegory in the context of American individualism. It asks the question, can individuals practice personal freedom and exercise the self-restraint necessary for a democratic society to survive? Revelation answers that in Christ personal freedom is rooted in the love of God that provides necessary restraint.

As its task, apologetic theology answers the world's questions with the Bible and proves practical and accessible to all Christians, trained in theology or not. It stresses the Bible's universal relevance to every individual, group and circumstance or philosophical system.



**Rick Wade**

In 1 Peter 3:15 we're told to "give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for your faith." The roots of Peter's exhortation can be found in Isaiah 8 where God warns His people to stand firm when the enemy attacks, and in Luke 12 and 21 where Jesus tells His disciples what to do when persecutions come. In both passages in Luke, Jesus uses the word that is translated "defense" in Peter's epistle. In Luke 21:13 he says something interesting: "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." I see two main exhortations here: faithfulness and witness. Elaborate arguments and evidences can serve that. But defense ought to be conducted for the purpose of proclaiming Christ and winning the lost, not merely to prove Christianity true. That is too low a target.

Apologetics with non-Christians can include the defense of Christian doctrines, challenges to other beliefs, and persuasion. To be done well, these require knowledge of at least basic Christian doctrines and the ability to discriminate between the true and the false. That skill can be applied in a variety of areas such as theology, philosophy, history, culture, and the broader human experience.

If we should attempt to persuade someone by making a case for the faith, where do we begin? In one respect, we should begin with questions that are being asked rather than with our own pet arguments. But in another respect, we should begin as Christians, thinking and speaking within the context of Christian beliefs, rather than attempting to stand on some neutral ground with unbelievers to look at evidences together.

One mistake younger apologists can make is deciding to find some non-Christians and “do apologetics” with them. This is to focus on the arguments and not on the listeners. Apologetics provides tools for Christians to use along with the tools of proper Bible interpretation, counseling, practical hands-on help, and other things as needed in the context of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus and drawing people to Him.

Apologetics serves not only non-Christians but Christians by clarifying the differences between Christian and non-Christian beliefs and by showing why our beliefs are intellectually credible. This should serve to strengthen our faith.



## **Paul Rutherford**

When I tell someone I meet at church that I’m into apologetics, the most common response, I get is, “Huh?” After I tell them what it means, perhaps the next most common response is, “What are you sorry for?”, inferring from the similar sound of the word “apology” that I must be apologizing

for something.

While the root word in Greek is the same for both words—*apologia*. these words in English have rather different meanings. So, I will begin my turn at defining apologetics by clarifying what it is not.

Apologetics is not being sorry for Christianity. Let's make that clear right now. I am not sorry I'm a Christian. On the contrary, Christ is the source of all my boasting. He is the source of my joy in my life. It is Christ who gives me purpose, meaning, even significance. No, apologetics is not being sorry for Christianity.

Years ago I had lunch with a friend one Sunday after church and explained to him what I do—apologetics. After using 1 Peter 3:15 to define it as making a defense for the faith, he responded by saying our faith should not be defensive, but offensive. My friend got one thing right—our faith does have an offensive component.

But, my friend also got one thing wrong. The command to defend our faith does not describe the entirety of our experience as a believer. This passage does not mean that our faith should be entirely defensive, or even primarily defensive. We should, however, have the capacity to defend our faith.

To conclude my definition and this series, I will share a recent change in my perspective over the years. When I first began studying apologetics years ago, I did it to seek affirmation of my convictions. To be honest, I studied not to “show myself approved” (2 Timothy 2:15), but rather to satisfy a sense of self-righteousness. I did apologetics in order to show others I was right and they were wrong. Scripture calls that pride. And, although that's no longer my primary motivation, the struggle remains today.

It's not that I no longer think I'm right. I do think the positions I hold are right, but as an apologist my goals have

changed. I no longer expect others to take the same positions I do. Now, I desire others to think more biblically than they did before.

My hope for you reading this article is that your reasons for defending the faith are motivated more by Christ than by culture, and that by considering what it means to defend your faith you are now a more confident ambassador for Christ.

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## The Purpose of Life

*Paul Rutherford looks at the purpose of life from his Christian perspective as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Hollywood.*

On a warm day recently I visited my alma mater. And between the hallowed halls of old, a chance encounter reconnected me with an old friend. Eager for news, she asked me what I'd done since graduating, and my easy reply included mission work and how much I enjoy it. She smiled and said, "That's great, as long as you're happy." Have you had this type of conversation before?



If you have, then perhaps you also understand my consternation at my friend's response. I don't do mission work to be happy. I do it to honor and please the Lord Jesus Christ. On some level I felt misunderstood. Yet, her response indicates, I think, a prominent view held in our culture that

happiness is what really matters. As far as her response is concerned, I could just as well have taken a job at a coffee shop, so long as I was happy.

Her response, while not uncommon, demonstrates a prevailing value in our culture today—pluralism. Mankind's ultimate purpose can be attained through multiple acceptable means, be they religion, economics, or otherwise.

You might be saying to yourself, "How did you get from your friend's comment about your happiness to mankind's ultimate purpose?" Good question. I skipped a few steps. When my friend bases her approval of what others do on their happiness, that means that what they *do* to be happy matters less than the fact that they *are* happy. Being happy then becomes the primary purpose or aim in life. You see? Happiness becomes a sort of general unit of measure for life's success. Since I am happy in life, I received my friend's stamp of approval.

But what is our ultimate purpose? Isn't that the million dollar question! And it's precisely the question I want to explore in this article. The answer you give will depend on your perspective. So I'll consider several different perspectives, or worldviews, including my own, Christianity. Contrary to current thinking, the fact that there are different perspectives which result in differing meanings to life does not mean that all perspectives are equally true or even valid. Truth is found in Scripture so that's where we look to discover the true meaning of life.

As a Christian, I believe the ultimate purpose in life is salvation; that is, after I die I want to be with God for eternity.

"Being with God for eternity is great," you might say. "But how does one do that?" That's a great question. Certainly not all Christians will state it the same way, but the answer is believing in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as God who died for your



sins and rose again to new life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). A Christian living out this principle patterns his life and relationships after Jesus Christ—serving, loving, and teaching.

Christianity is unmistakably present in America, but obviously this isn't the case in every culture. Next we'll consider mankind's purpose according to a very different worldview closer to home than you might think: Buddhism.

## **Buddhism**

I was at a diner last week grabbing a late night burger with my friend from Bible study, and I mentioned a desire to start a new workout regimen. He handed me a business card for a place doing some new form of [yoga](#), apparently really good for you.

Is it me, or does yoga seem to be increasing in currency among Christians as just one more way to work out?

It's totally fine for Christians to practice yoga as physical exercise, isn't it? The answer is too complex to say here, but the sheer fact that we pose the question underscores the unmistakable impression yoga has made on American culture.

What if I did practice yoga? What if I were a practicing Buddhist? Would that make a difference anyway? I think so.

To ask a larger question, what is our ultimate purpose? Once again, the answer depends upon your perspective. For the yoga-practicing Buddhist, the answer is nothing. Literally. The ultimate purpose for life is to cease to exist, or what is called *nirvana*.

Traditionally understood to be from India, yoga is a discipline of the mind and the body, and is actively practiced today by both Buddhists and Hindus.<sup>{1}</sup> But increasingly, Americans have jettisoned the spiritual disciplines of yoga,

ignoring its spiritual aspects, in favor of the sheerly physical, often in lieu of the morning jog.

Now, ceasing to exist, or *nirvana*, may seem more like an anti-purpose for life because it is defined by not living rather than that for which one lives. Nevertheless, much thought and action is involved in this monumental goal of *nirvana*.

One such step in attaining *nirvana* is realizing the second of the Four Noble Truths: all frustration in life arises from desire. Did that make your head spin? It makes mine spin. Simply put, frustration is an unmet expectation or desire, so frustration's origin then, is desire.

Life is filled with desires—food, shelter, or clothing may be the first to come to mind—but there are a myriad of others from cars, to jewelry, technology, even relationships.

Follow me here. Since desire leads to frustration, the best way to eliminate frustration is to eliminate desire. This is precisely the path to *nirvana*, the elimination of desire. Therefore, we must cease to exist in order to free ourselves from this frustration or suffering.

Do you see the difference in life's purpose? The ultimate purpose in life for the Christian is to be with God for eternity, but for a Buddhist it's to cease to exist. Very different indeed.

## **Hinduism**

Fifty singers gather on a Sunday morning in Queens. The director groups them together and gives them one final word of instruction before they begin. Listeners don't entirely fall silent. Priests in the background continue to laugh among themselves, as the choir begins, "Om! Ganesha Sharanam!"

Notice something different about this picture? It may not fit your expectations. That's because this choir isn't singing

praise to Jesus Christ; they aren't even in a church. Rather they're Hindus worshipping in their New York temple.

Surprised? So were many of the devotees gathered that Sunday morning in late August 2009, the New York Times reported. [\[2\]](#) Most of the faithful Hindus worshipping there for years had never before heard a Hindu choir. It is a mix of both Hindu and Christian traditions.

This story testifies to the strange and wonderful effects of very different religions meeting in a single culture, and undoubtedly demonstrates the pervasiveness of Hinduism in American culture today.

Choirs seem so commonplace in America. How can a Hindu, like those mentioned earlier, have never heard one in his own religion before? The answer lies in the difference between Hindu and Christian worship.

Hindu worship tends to be much more individualistic. And while predominantly occurring at a temple rather than at one's home, Hindu worship is more focused on prayers and rituals rather than on an assembly or gathering as a Christian understands a church service.

Take a step back. Ask a larger question. Why does the Hindu go to temple? What's his motivation? The answer? To appease a myriad of gods in hopes of being reincarnated in the next life as a higher life form. If you're a human being listening to this right now, then you've already had thousands of good lifetimes prior, combined to bring you to your current form.

To be fair, Hinduism is a huge religion with over one billion practitioners, spanning thousands of years, and existing in multiple different cultures. Some scholars believe it is the oldest recorded religion. So to ascribe the Hindu's motivation as wanting to please the gods is a drastic oversimplification, but is nonetheless true for many if not most Hindus.

You see, for the Hindu the world exists eternally. People die and are reborn all the time in a never-ending cycle. The ultimate purpose for life, then, is to be freed from the never-ending cycle of rebirth and become one with Brahma, or the ultimate singularity of the universe. This release is called *moksha*. It's achieved by offering sacrifices to the gods, including prayers, and right living.

Does this sound like your life? If not, you're probably not Hindu. This further underscores the fact that all religions at their core may not all be the same.

## Islam

"Boycott Facebook" reads the placard of an Islamist protestor in Karachi.

Late spring 2010 in Pakistan, a Facebook page declares, "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!" A Pakistani high court deems the material highly offensive, and the entire Facebook website was shut down within its borders as a result, the *Wall Street Journal* reports.<sup>{3}</sup>

Ban Facebook! You may find yourself asking, why would anyone ever do that? What about rights to free speech, or exercise of religion? Doesn't a Facebook ban deny people just such rights? Well, under a government far less liberal in doling out these liberties, claiming rights quickly makes a sticky situation.

But the short answer to the motivation for banning Facebook is because they're Muslim, and as such they regard as sacred Mohammed, their most famed prophet. He's so sacred, in fact, that to depict him in a portrait is a kind of blasphemy. Hence art from Muslim cultures is either calligraphy or geometric (think mosaics).

There is more going on here beneath the surface, leading an entire country to ban Facebook. It's not just reverence for a significant religio-cultural phenomenon, or even devotion to

their faith. No, it goes deeper than that. Muslims have a different perspective from most Westerners on how this world operates at its most fundamental level.

For the Muslim there is one God, Allah. He is the supreme unquestioned creator and Lord of the universe who revealed his intentions for mankind through his prophet Mohammed. Reverence for Allah is paramount, even above the value of the individual. This leads Muslims to value obedience to Allah over freedoms of the individual. In this case obedience is not portraying Mohammed.

You may respond by posing once again the previous question: what about a man's right to speech or religion? But for the Muslim, you're simply asking the wrong question. A better question the Muslim would ask is, what about putting Mohammed in his proper place, and by extension obeying Allah?

The ultimate purpose in life for a Muslim is to obey Allah and to be rewarded after life by entering paradise. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe mankind is sinful and in need of a savior, but only needs to perform the right actions, of which we are certainly capable. While Muslims hope for the mercy of Allah, the right to enter paradise is a result of obedience, not his grace. So central is this unmitigated obedience to Muslims, that many give their lives to defend Allah and their way of life.

Rights to free speech aside, when given the choice between a Facebook ban and martyrdom, suddenly Facebook deprivation doesn't seem so bad.

## **Hollywood**

An honest working man returns home from a rough day at the office. He's a struggling ad specialist for a sports magazine. He's in his mid-thirties, single, and completely eligible. But the right woman just hasn't come along. He's a handsome,

brown-haired man with kind blue eyes and a knack for making you want to trust him when he flashes you his easy smile. We long for him to find satisfaction in someone as we trace the story of his search.

One night he meets a dashing young lady. Our hearts jump for him. A relationship ensues and they grow closer. One night in desperation to express his deepest and truest feelings for the gal, he confesses, "You complete me." Perhaps now you realize I'm describing the story from Hollywood's hit 1996 film, *Jerry Maguire*.

We've been considering the ultimate purpose of man from different perspectives, and, with an ever-increasing number of Americans considering themselves not religious, I've gone to a secular source for consideration: Hollywood.

Jerry Maguire's famous confession, "You complete me," is a wonderful illustration of mankind's ultimate purpose being himself, or what is called humanism. Maguire realizes something is missing in his life. He longs for satisfaction, for joy, for love, but his seeming inability to find it causes him pain. We realize that the world in which we live is broken and imperfect, and who would disagree?

Maguire finds in this woman, in this relationship, the completion of himself. He looks to her to be what he cannot be himself. In so doing, he creates out of her a savior. He looks to her to save him from his misery of singleness and heartache. He needs her in order to be whole himself.

This story is a clear demonstration of mankind looking to himself to be his ultimate purpose. I am generalizing a bit to choose words from a single film, but many messages from Hollywood films don't contradict this theme. We want to be able to save ourselves. Isn't that the American ideal: pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps?

Beware what Hollywood would have us believe, that our ultimate

purpose is ourselves, and only we can save ourselves. Hollywood would have us believe that life can be found in relationships, people, or even ourselves. It's a lie. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Only Jesus can save mankind. Serving Him is the only purpose that will bring satisfaction and joy in life, only in Him alone.

"What is my ultimate purpose?" That's the question. The answers we've considered from different perspectives range from happiness to appeasing the gods. Why does it matter? Because your ultimate purpose determines how you live, and while we may all be alike, since we are all human, when it comes to what really matters in life, we are very different indeed.

### Notes

1. "Yoga," Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga) (accessed May 6, 2010).
2. Jonathan Allen, The New York Times online, [nyti.ms/hJUJ8b](http://nyti.ms/hJUJ8b) (accessed May 20, 2010).
3. Tom Wright, "Pakistan Maintains Facebook Ban," The Wall Street Journal online, [on.wsj.com/dJiwI6](http://on.wsj.com/dJiwI6) (accessed May 20, 2010).

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**“How Do I Get Over False  
Guilt About Watching**

# Profanity on TV?"

I had/have a conviction to not listen to TV profanity. So I bought a TV Guardian (a device which blocks out all of TV profanity). I was so happy, problem solved. However, I still sense a somewhat deep sense of guilt. I believe I am struggling with false guilt, because I am feeling guilty for doing something (using a TV Guardian) which I know to be godly and just. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how do I cure false guilt?

I applaud your desire not to expose yourself to profane language. That's commendable. Further, you took steps to ensure. That desire is for holiness and let me affirm that.

The fact that you feel guilty about it is difficult for me to assess without knowing precisely what it is you feel guilty about, or why. Answering these questions will help you determine whether your guilt is in fact false guilt, as you put it, or just good old fashioned conviction from the Holy Spirit.

Probe's president Kerby Anderson wrote an article on [False Guilt](#) which explores these very issues and can help you answer just such questions. Check it out. I pray it will bless you. I hope this is helpful ☐

Praying for you,

Paul Rutherford

Thank you. Somebody else pointed out to me that maybe the problem is that I am remembering a little of the profanity. You see, I used to watch some of the same shows with no filter. God convicted me so I bought a TV Guardian. However, since I had already watched the shows without the Guardian I can still remember some of the curse words. What should I do?



Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

Allow me to “jump in” here and try to help you a bit. I think Paul did a good job of counseling you.

After reading your follow up to his response, I sense an uneasy pattern may be at work in you: a need to perform holiness for God and not mess up. This could be the root of the problem you are having—not understanding very fully the [grace](#) God offers.

Rather than focus on the curse words that you recall (or that fact that you recall them, which is no surprise, since God’s forgiveness does not mean He gives us a lobotomy), it would be more fruitful to concentrate on the enabling of God’s Holy Spirit for any believer to experience and live out holiness in our lives. It’s a subtle shift to talk about, but profoundly different in effect.

How might this look in your situation? Try applying some biblical principles to your thinking:

- *Make your mind up to fill it (your mind) with Scripture—the holy words of life. Read Scripture daily like your life depends on it (your spiritual life and health DO depend on it), but it’s not to get favor with God. That’s already yours if you put your faith in Him—Jesus took care of our relationship with His Father.*

- *John 15:3-5 says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” So, if you have believed in Jesus to forgive your sin and keep you from everlasting punishment that we all deserve, you are clean. He said so. Act like you believe it*

and move on.

- *Abide in Christ (live, breathe, think about, aim your life at and depend on Him for everything). This doesn't mean you lay down and expect Him to do your living out of faith for you, but it means you have no confidence in yourself to either care about sin or defeat it. It's He who works in you to make you holy. (Notice those two verses linked to above are back-to-back in the same thought. You cooperate with God's work in your life by letting Him work and doing your part.) Your job is to let him, to yield, to put to death (stop feeding) the flesh. Getting TV Guardian seems like a great step—but it's Christ who has to work out the memories, etc. for believers.*

- *Speaking of memories of images (sexual or otherwise), curses / cuss words, violence, ungodly things, here is something that is effective for me: give them to God to bury them, to take them off your mental screen or from your mental "hearing." I base this on the verse: "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). This applies a general principle to our own rebellious, fleshly thoughts that have gotten corrupted by things like bad language.*

- *Most of all, don't worry about it. "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done." (Philippians 4:6, NLT)*

You seem to be obsessed with "doing it right" and "not messing up" (as I would put it). This is not trust, so it's not God-centered or God-honoring—and it won't work. Ephesians 1 says, "It was for freedom that Christ set you free." You neither

have to live in bondage to sin (like cursing) OR to having to keep the Law (keeping from cursing or thinking about those words). You're free to rise above all of that by living a genuinely Spirit-led holy life—believe it and learn to live it. It takes practice and you *will* fail! Go back to God, ask forgiveness for this particular failure (you've already been saved from the penalty of sin if you believe Him for that) and start all over.

Ultimately, if you cannot get past this any other way, are you willing to give up the movies—even if your TV Guardian goes unused and you miss those fave movies? Giving them up could, for you, be part of putting the deeds of the flesh to death and picking up your cross to follow Him (“Then, calling the crowd to join His disciples, He said, ‘If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow Me.’” —Mark 8:34)

Believe me as one who's been asked to give up various things enough times in my 35 years of walking with Christ, when the Lord leads you to give something up, it's well worth it.

I hope this provides some guidance. It goes deep. Read it and the Scripture passages many times, praying that the Lord will make things clear to you and apply them with others holding you accountable—share with mature Christians, your pastor, etc.

Praying with Paul for you, \_\_\_\_\_. Thanks for writing.

Byron Barlowe

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# Frasier Worldview Check

I got hoodwinked tonight.

I was watching re-runs of the old NBC television show Frasier—based on the minor character from *Cheers*, Frasier Crane—when I found myself agreeing with Frasier's words describing Judaism. It wasn't until later that night, as I passed those words through my worldview filter, that I came to realize something was wrong about Frasier's comments. Frasier (at least the writers) was not giving Judaism a fair shake.

In the episode, Frasier's son Freddy is celebrating his thirteenth birthday. Freddy's mother is Jewish, which makes Freddy Jewish as well. The thirteenth birthday is a special one for Jewish children; it is the point in their lives when they become adults. To commemorate their passage into adulthood, a celebration is in order: a *bar-mitzvah*.

Frasier's friend Roz knows that he is not Jewish, and asks him what that's like for him. His response is what hoodwinked me:

*Roz: Is it weird to have a son brought up in a different religion from yours?*

*Frasier: Not at all, Roz. It's a faith that espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. All values which I cherish.*

What tricked me was not what Frasier said but what he didn't say. Jewish culture definitely espouses love, compassion, duty, education, and art. I completely agree. Several friends who have helped me through dark times in my life have been Jewish. I feel a special affinity for the Jews as a Christian because I read the Hebrew Bible as a part of my own Christian Bible—essentially the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

But Frasier made no mention of the Hebrew God, who is the central figure of their faith. He is their Creator, Sustainer, Protector, and Savior. The Hebrew Bible is the story of this God and his special, chosen people. How then could Frasier have completely ignored Him?

To be fair, Frasier was merely speaking about the points of Judaism with which he agrees. We all understand that intuitively as soon as we read the dialogue. However, if these aspects of love, compassion, duty, education, and art are the only elements of Judaism that resonate with him, then I suspect he does not truly identify with the heart of the Hebrew faith because he has not mentioned anything about their God.

Granted, this represents one comment in one episode. However, there may be something else going on beneath Frasier's words. When asked about the apparent conflict between Frasier's religious beliefs and his son's, in some sense he responds by saying that they are not so different. But he only says they are not so different in those five specific aspects: love, compassion, duty, education, and art. If he's saying that's all there is to Judaism, then I would have to disagree.

Philosophers have a fancy name for what Frasier did: *reductionism*. He has reduced Judaism down to smaller constituent parts which, when reassembled, do not recreate the whole. It seems unfair to equate Judaism solely with these five aspects because many other causes, beliefs, or even organizations can be characterized as espousing precisely the same principles, but not be Jewish in the least.

For example, Ancient Greece had a culture that espoused all such principles, yet it had no particular religious affiliation at all. Culturally we could also consider Italy during the Renaissance, or even the Chinese under the Tang dynasty.

Yet, cultures like these that valued love, compassion, duty, education, and art are in other ways very dissimilar to Judaism. Similarities do not equate to identity. That is, just because a religion or culture shares certain attributes does not mean that they are the same in essence. However, *reductionism* falsely makes them seem equivalent just because they share some traits.

So there must be more to Judaism than just these five aspects mentioned by Frasier.

Frasier's religious synopsis may not seem like a very big deal because it is, after all, only one statement. But this one sentence is not what bothers me. I run across people making claims like these all the time in conversation, in magazines, news, practically everywhere. It's sloppy thinking, really. I just want to encourage us not to slip into *reductionism* ourselves—and further, to be even more careful about what we take in, keeping that worldview filter on at all times.

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