The Sovereignty of God

Rick Wade helps us understand the full meaning of the sovereignty of God highlighting its immense practical importance. If God is truly sovereign, then what He says He will do, He can and will bring to pass. It is the choice of our sovereign God to endow us with free will and as sovereign He can make it so without limiting His sovereign power. God has promised us a glorious future and He has the power and the resolve to make it happen.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

What's the Issue?

In whom or in what do people place their trust these days? Money? Their social group? Themselves? Some use exercise to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and maybe even add years to their lives. Some look to spiritual practices, or work for a safer environment. Such things have their proper place, but should they be our source or sources of confidence? We all live with a basic insecurity that causes us to look for something stable to hold onto. It is obvious that there are forces in this world stronger than we are, some of which have no concern for our welfare. So we latch on to something that will see us through whatever problems might come our way.

Although Christians are to attend to their financial, physical, and social welfare (among other things), they are look to God ultimately for their security. We're derided by some for seeking a "crutch" or a "security blanket," but everyone looks for support in one place or another. The question is, Which crutch or security blanket is true and sufficient for our needs? Christians look to the true God Who has promised to be our "help in times of trouble."

Because of our different personalities and situations in life, we look for different things in God. What do you want in a God? What do you need in a God? Love? Justice? Mercy? No matter what we might need in a God, if that God lacks one particular thing, the others will do little good. That is the power to "pull it off," to exercise His love, justice, and mercy, and to do all the things He says He will do without opposition powerful enough to deter Him. We need our God to be sovereign; to be, as Arthur Pink said, "the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will."{1}

Often when the subject of God's sovereignty comes up among Christians, it's in the context of the sovereignty/free will debate. Although I will address that matter at a later point, my desire is that we will see the sovereignty of God as a foundation for confidence rather than simply a topic for debate.

God's sovereignty has immense practical importance. For one thing, it makes Him our proper object of worship. He is the almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all that exists. There is none higher, none more worthy of worship and honor.

For another thing, that God is sovereign means He can be counted on, for nothing can stand against Him. He can be counted on for our salvation. He can be counted on to carry us through times of difficulty such that nothing touches us that is not in keeping with His desires for us. And He can be counted on to keep all the promises He has made to us.

Characteristics of Sovereignty

What does the Bible say about God that causes us to believe He is sovereign? For one thing, God is called by names that

convey the meaning of sovereignty. In the Old Testament, He is called *Adonay*. Second Samuel 7:22 in the NIV reads: “How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears.” In the New Testament, God is called *despotēs*, from which we get our word “despot.” This word “denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life.” The term is usually used over against the word *doulos* or “slave.”{2} In Rev. 6:10 we read where those slain for their testimony “called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'”

Another thing we see in Scripture is that God has characteristics that call for ascribing sovereignty to Him.

First, God exercises rightful *authority*. He has the right to do with the creation what He desires because it is His creation. He also is active in His creation, contrary to the deistic understanding which is that God created the universe but then left it to run according to natural laws with little or no intervention on His part.

Second, God has the *power* to do what He desires with His universe. “All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing,” Daniel wrote. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?'” (4:35).

Third, God has the *knowledge* required to rule over all. He knows what’s going on, and exactly what needs to be done. He knows the past, present, and future perfectly.

Fourth, God has the *will* to do what He desires. He does what He says He will do. (Is. 46:9, 10; 55:11)

Biblical Examples

These attributes are seen in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament, for example, God showed His sovereignty in the experience of Moses and the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt. He showed His *authority* when He simply stepped in and told Moses what He would do for His people and later when He overrode Pharaoh's ruling and showed who was really in charge. He demonstrated His *power* by turning Moses' staff into a serpent; by making Moses' hand leprous and then healing it; through sending the plagues upon the Egyptians; and then by parting the sea before the fleeing Israelites. "By this you shall know that I am the LORD," He said (Ex. 7:17). God had perfect *knowledge* of the plight of the Israelites (3:7, 9), and He knew what He would do with and for them (3:12, 19, 20, 22). Finally, He was faithful to His promises; His *will* was not thwarted.

God showed His sovereign rule in the New Testament as well in the experience of Mary. He showed His *authority* over this young woman when He simply stepped into her life and told her what He was going to do (Lk. 1:26ff). He claimed to have the *power* to do what He desired: "For nothing will be impossible with God," said the angel (v. 37). God *knew* Mary (v. 30), and He knew what her future held because He had plans for Her (vv. 31, 35). And He faithfully fulfilled His promises, according to His *will*, as Mary knew He would (1:42; 2:6, 7; see also her exclamation of praise in 1:49-55).

These are only two of numerous illustrations of the sovereign authority of God in Scripture. We can read about similar demonstrations in the lives of other people such as Job (Job 38-41; 42:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:31, 32, 34-35), Joseph (Gen. 50:20), and Jesus (Acts 2:23, 24). And that's just a small sampling.

But God's sovereign rule didn't end with the writing of the Bible. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is still sovereignly active in His creation. God is "the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords" who will draw history as we know it to a close with the coming of

Christ “at the proper time” (1 Tim. 6:15). He determines the times and boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26). Not only did He create all things, Paul writes that “in Him all things hold together” (Col. 2:17). Notice the present tense in Eph. 1:11 which says that God is the one “who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

Sovereignty and Free Will

The problem of the tension between God’s sovereign control and man’s free will is a perennial one among Christians, especially theology students! While this is an interesting debate (to some), it easily overshadows any discussion of the benefits of God’s sovereignty. Battle lines are drawn and the debate commences, with the result that sovereignty becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Nonetheless, it seems inappropriate to ignore the issue in a discussion of sovereignty. So I’ll offer just a few comments, not to attempt to settle the issue, but to bring a few points to light for you the reader to consider.

From our previous discussion, we already have a basic understanding of what sovereignty is. What about free will? Note that here we aren’t talking about the freedom that comes when we are released from the power of sin through faith in Christ. According to Scripture, we are enslaved to whichever master we choose to follow. But to be “enslaved” to Christ is to be free to be and do what we were made to be and do.

We’re talking here about freedom of the will, the ability to choose or determine one’s actions without coercion. Because one’s actions are so strongly influenced by one’s upbringing, religious beliefs, circumstances of life, etc., our situation can never be one of complete indeterminacy. {3} Thus, the issue at hand doesn’t pit completely free will against God’s control. It really is over our ability to make uncoerced, significant choices for which we can be held responsible: it

is about God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.

Just as we read of a God in control of the history of His creation throughout Scripture, we also observe people making choices for which they are either rewarded or punished. It seems clear enough in Scripture that we are able to make uncoerced choices. Jesus bewailed the condition of Jerusalem in His day: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,” He said, “and you were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37). The Jews are blamed for their choice—or lack of it. We’re even commanded to make choices: “Choose this day whom you will serve,” Joshua commanded (24:15). Jesus told us to “repent and believe the gospel” (Mk. 1:15) as if we could choose to do so. Abraham received what God had promised because he chose to obey God (Gen. 22:15-18).

But if we have this freedom to choose, how can God be truly sovereign over the course of history? What a conundrum!

One principle that absolutely must remain paramount is that Scripture is our final authority, not reason. This isn’t to say the scriptural position is against reason; it’s merely an affirmation that our reason is not up to fully grasping God and His ways. We have to make do with what He tells us; all speculation beyond that is merely—well, speculation.

What do we read in the Bible? We read that both God is in control and that we can be legitimately held responsible for our choices. And we don’t have to find one verse in support of one and another verse in support of the other! In Gen. 50: 20, Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” Peter rebuked the Jews at Pentecost: “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men,” he said (Acts 2:23). That the executioners bore at least some

of the guilt is clear from the fact that Jesus asked for their forgiveness on the cross (Lk. 23:34). In Isaiah we read that it was God who sent the Assyrians to punish Judah, but then punished them for doing it with the wrong attitude (10:5-15)!

This issue typically arises in discussions of the matter of election to salvation. Jesus and the apostles made the offer as though listeners (or readers) could accept it or reject it. God doesn't play games; it would make the whole call to repentance and salvation a farce if our choice had nothing to do with it. We're told to "repent and believe in the Gospel," (Mk. 1:15). But we're also told that it is God who chooses (cf. Jn. 15:16; Rom. 9:14-22).

This duality is also seen in our prayer life. We're taught that all things come to pass according to God's will, but also that our prayers make a difference. Paul said that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). But through Ezekiel God said, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (22:30, 31). Someone might say that it is God who inclines us to pray, but that doesn't diminish the fact that we can be scolded for not praying as though the responsibility were ours to do so (James 4:2).

People who spend much time thinking about this matter tend to lean more heavily to one side than to the other. It's important to note, however, that we do not lose a bit of tension by emphasizing one over the other—either God's sovereignty or man's free will. If we overemphasize God's sovereignty, there is the difficulty of understanding the judgment of God of those who weren't elected.{4} How does this mesh with the scriptural teaching that God doesn't show favoritism, or to the command to love all people, even our enemies? On the other hand, if we overemphasize man's free will, how can a man ever be saved? "An excessively narrow

Arminianism," says Mark Hanna, "lapses into synergism (the union of human effort or will with divine grace)." It diminishes the enslaving power of sin, and it gives us the power to limit God. {5}

Because of these tensions, I'm inclined to agree with Donald Carson who says that "the sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be explored."{6} It is an issue that I personally have had to let stand without any real hopes for final resolution. Some might consider this an "easy out," but I'm content to see this as one of the "secret things" spoken of in Dt. 29:29.

However, that doesn't mean the matter of God's sovereignty isn't important. As I see it, the important question is, How shall I live with both biblical truths in view: that God is sovereign over all, and that I will be held responsible for my choices? I think the old hymn "Trust and Obey" sums it up. I have been given the responsibility to obey God. But I'm thankful that the final burden of accomplishing His will doesn't rest on me! For that, I am to trust Him. This is the crux of the sovereignty-responsibility issue as far as I'm concerned. While we have the ability and responsibility to choose, we can have confidence that God's plan will be accomplished, that His promises will be fulfilled, and that in the end, everything is going to turn out just right.

The Significance of Sovereignty for Our Lives

Let's wind up this brief overview with a look at some applications of God's sovereignty in our lives.

First, that God is sovereign makes clear who is to be the focus of our worship. All glory goes to Him. To Jesus "be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen," John said (Rev. 1:6). "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and

wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:12) the angels sang. When we worship individually and corporately, our eyes should be on the sovereign God rather than on ourselves. Although we will share in the glories of Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), God will not give His glory away to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11). He is the One who should get all the credit.

That God is sovereign means that God's redemptive purposes will not be thwarted. He will build His church (Matt. 16:18), and we can know we are part of it. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

It also means that all God has foretold will surely come to pass. He is working out His plans (Is. 42:5-9), and nothing will take away what God has for us. No one can hold back His hand (Dan. 4:35). He is able to keep His promises, and because He is true to His word, He can be counted on to keep them (Is. 55:11; 2 Tim. 2:13; cf. Rev. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6).

In addition to that, because the sovereign God is also the God of love, He can be trusted in the fullest sense. The awesome power of God is a fearful thing to His enemies (Matt. 10:28; Heb. 10:31). But to those who love Him, the combination of His sovereignty and love makes it possible for us to truly rest, to live without fear. This is in stark contrast to gods of other religions who constantly have to be appeased to avert their anger, or even to the gods of our secular society, such as money, power, health, and prestige, all of which can let us down.

Finally, that God is sovereign means He will ultimately triumph over evil. We're told that in the end the great enemy death will be done away with (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes," John writes. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4).

Earlier I noted that the topic of God's sovereignty easily becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Just as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should serve to bring comfort to those who sometimes doubt their ability to hold on to God, the doctrine of sovereignty should serve to comfort those who fear, to encourage those who understand clearly their own limitations, and to provide a counter to the pessimism of our day. While being fully aware of the futility of the course of this world, we should still be optimistic people, because God has promised us a glorious future, and He has the power and resolve to make it happen.

Notes

1. A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 19.
2. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Lord, Master," by H. Bietenhard.
3. *Webster's New World College Dictionary,* 4th ed., s.v. "free will." See also Dagobert D. Runes, ed. Dictionary of Philosophy (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Free-will," by Ledger Wood.
4. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 60.
5. Hanna, 59.
6. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 2.

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The Meaning of the Cross

Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ" has brought the topic of Jesus' suffering and death into the national conversation. Rick Wade explores the meaning of the cross.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A Scandal At the Center

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created quite a bit of controversy, both inside the church and out. One objection from Christians is that the film is imbalanced for not giving due attention to the resurrection of Jesus. There is at least one reason I disagree. That is because, as theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, the focus today is primarily on the resurrection, and the cross takes second place.{1} I recall Carl Henry, the late theologian, noting in the 1980s that the emphasis in evangelicalism had shifted from justification by faith to the new life. We talk often about the positive differences Christianity can make in our lives because of the resurrection. Gibson has forced us to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. And that's a good thing.

Before the foundation of the world, it was established that redemption would be accomplished through Jesus' death (Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Peter wrote that we were "ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Isaiah 53:5 reads: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

But what a way to save the world! It flies in the face of common sense! From the time of Christ, the crucifixion as the basis of our salvation has been a major problem. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are

perishing," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18a). The Greeks saw the cross as foolishness (literally, "moronic"), for they believed that truth was discovered through wisdom or reason. For the Jews it was a scandal, a stumbling block, for they couldn't believe God would save through a man accursed. They asked for signs, but instead got a crucified Messiah.

In modern times the cross was a problem because it meant we could not save ourselves through our own ingenuity. In postmodern times, while many young people feel an affinity with Jesus in His suffering, they have a hard time accepting that this is the only way God saves. And the atonement was much more than a simple identification with suffering humanity.

It is easy for us to rush past the cross and focus on the empty tomb in our evangelism. Think about it. How many of us make the cross central in our witness to unbelievers? The new life of the resurrection is a much easier "sell" than the suffering of the cross. We want to present a Gospel that is appealing to the hearer that grabs people's attention and immediately makes them want it.

In our apologetics, our arguments and evidence must be presented in terms unbelievers understand while yet not letting unbelievers set the standards for us. Paul was an educated man, and he had the opportunity to show off his intellectual abilities with the philosophers in Corinth. But Paul wouldn't play the game on their turf. He wouldn't rest the Gospel on philosophical speculation as a system of belief more elegant and persuasive than the philosophies of the Greeks. In fact, he unashamedly proclaimed a very unelegant, even repulsive sounding message. He knew the scandal of the cross better than most, but he didn't shy away from it. He made it central.

A key word today among Christians is "relevant." We want a message that is relevant to contemporary society. But in our

search for relevance, we can unwittingly let our message be molded by what current fashion considers relevant. We become confused between showing the relevance of the Gospel to our true situation and making the Gospel relevant by shaping it to fit the sensibilities of our neighbors.

Os Guinness had this to say about relevance:
By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.{2}

Guinness doesn't deny the relevance of the Gospel. Indeed, it is part of our task to show how it is of ultimate relevance to our situation as fallen people. If the message of Scripture is true—that we are lost and in need of a salvation we cannot secure on our own—then there is nothing more relevant than the cross of Christ. For that was God's answer to our problem. But it is relevant to our true situation as God sees it, not according to our situation as we see it.

Sin and Guilt in Modern Times

The cross of Christ addresses directly the matter of sin. But what does that mean? Do people "sin" anymore? What a silly question, you think. But is it? Of course, we all agree that people do things we call "bad". But what is the nature of this "badness"? Is it really sin? Or, is something "bad" just something inconvenient or harmful to me? Or maybe a simple violation of civil laws? Sin is a word used to describe a violation of God's holiness and law. While the majority of people in our country still believe in God, the consensus about what makes for right and wrong is that we are the ones to decide that, that there is no transcendent law. If there is

no transcendent law, however, what are we to make of guilt? Is there such a thing as objective guilt? What do we make of subjective guilt—of guilt feelings?

As the battles of World War I raged in Europe, P.T. Forsyth reflected on the question of God and evil and the meaning of history. He reviewed the ways people had sought peace and unity and found them all wanting. Reason, basic emotions or sympathies, the fundamental workings of nature, and faith in progress all were found wanting. Turning back in history he could find no "plan of beneficent progress looking up through man's career."{3} Anytime it seemed enlightenment had come, it would be crushed by war. In his own day, World War I dashed the rosy-eyed hopes of progress being voiced. He said, "As we become civilised [sic], we grow in power over everything but ourselves, we grow in everything but power to control our power over everything."{4} But what if we looked to the future? Could hope be found there? If the past couldn't bring in a reign of love and unity, he asked, why should we expect the future to? What is there to make sense of the world we know?

The problem was, and is, a moral one, Forsyth said. "All deep and earnest experience shows us, and not Christianity alone, that the unity of the race lies in its moral centre, its moral crisis, and its moral destiny." What could possibly deal adequately with the guilt, "the last problem of the race"?{5} Is there anything in the history of our race that offers hope?

From the beginning, the church has taught that our fundamental problem is sin, and the cross of Christ provides hope that sin can and will one day be overcome. In modern times, however, the concept of "sin" seems rather quaint, a hold-over from the days of simplistic religious beliefs. Arthur Custance writes:

> The concept of sin is largely outmoded in modern secular thinking because sin implies some form of disobedience against an absolute moral law having to do with man's

> relationship with God, and not too many people believe any such relationship exists. It would not be the same as social misconduct which has to do with man's relationship to man and is highly relative but obviously cannot be denied. We have reached the point where social custom has displaced the law of God as the point of reference, where mores have replaced morals.{6}

We seem to be caught between two poles. On the one hand, we accept the Darwinist belief in our accidental and even materialistic nature—really no more than organic machines. On the other, we can't rid ourselves of the thought that there's something transcendent about us, something about us which is other than and even greater than our physical bodies which relates to a transcendent realm of some kind. We recognize in ourselves a moral nature that expresses itself through our conscience. In short, we know we do wrong things, and we know others do them, too. The problem is that we don't seem to know the nature and extent of the problem nor its solution. Many believe that there is no God against whom we sin, or if there is a God, He is too loving to hold our mistakes against us.

From a historical perspective, this is quite a turn-about, says Custance:

> Throughout history there has never been a society like our own in which the reality of sin has been so generally denied. Even in the worst days of the Roman Empire men felt the need to propitiate the gods, not so much because they had an exalted view of the gods but because they had a more realistic view of their own worthiness. It is a curious thing that even some of the cruelest of the Roman Emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, for example, were very conscious of themselves as sinners. We may call it superstition, but it was a testimony to a very real sense of inward unworthiness which was not based on man's relationship to man but rather man's relationship to the gods.{7}

On the other hand, despite the contemporary dismissal of sin, guilt is still a constant presence in the human psyche. Karl Menninger writes:

> I believe there is a general sentiment that sin is still with us, by us, and in us—somewhere. We are made vaguely uneasy by this consciousness, this persistent sense of guilt, and we try to relieve it in various ways. We project the blame on to others, we ascribe the responsibility to a group, we offer up scapegoat sacrifices, we perform or partake in dumb-show rituals of penitence and atonement. There is rarely a peccavi [confession of sin or guilt], but there's a feeling.{8}
> "This is a phenomenon of our day," writes Custance: "a burden of guilt but no sense of sin."{9}

But to what is the nature of this guilt? If there is no objective moral law that stands outside and above us all, what is guilt and who is guilty? Who judges us?

In the film, *A Walk on the Moon*, Pearl begins to have an affair with a traveling salesman. Pearl's husband, Marty, is a good man, but a bit of a square. It's 1969; Woodstock is about to make the news. And Pearl, who got pregnant by Marty when she was 17, is feeling a need to experiment, to capture what she missed by having to get married and starting the family life so early. When Pearl's affair is discovered, her husband is distraught. So is her daughter, Alison, who saw Pearl with her lover at Woodstock behaving like the teenagers around them. She's broken up that her mother might leave them.

But in all that happens following Pearl's confession, there is no mention of her affair being morally wrong. When she confessed, she told Marty she was sorry. Later, she told him she was sorry she'd hurt him. But her deed was at least somewhat excusable because there were things Pearl wanted to try, and her husband was too square, he didn't listen, he made jokes when she tried to suggest experimenting, especially

sexually. Even in her interactions with others, there is no mention of her act being morally wrong. When Alison told Pearl she had seen her at Woodstock, her complaint was that she was the teenager, not Pearl (implying it would be okay for Alison to go wild at Woodstock but not Pearl). Pearl's mother-in-law pointed out what the early marriage cost Marty: a college education promised by Marty's boss, who withdrew the offer when Pearl got pregnant. "Do you think you're the only one with dreams that didn't come through?" she asked.

So the affair was understandable given Marty's old-fashioned ways (which he shows to be shedding by switching the radio from a big band station to rock station, and when he's shown dancing to Jimi Hendrix on the stereo). The problem was the hurt Pearl cost a good man and a teenage girl. And that's about all there is to sin and guilt anymore.

According to one modern view, guilt is nature's way of teaching us what not to do in the future that has caused us problems in the past. Dr. Glenn Johnson, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, said "Guilt seems to be a very primitive mental mechanism that was programmed into us to protect us in the future from mistakes we made in the past." It is a "simple debriefing and rehearsal process that the mind engages in after perceiving that something negative has taken place and has caused painful and/or anxious feelings. . . . By forcing repeated reviews of a painful experience and the behaviors and elements leading up to it and associated with it, guilt essentially burns into our brains the connection between our behavior and the uncomfortable feelings we feel."{10}

What can we do about guilt? According to Dr. Johnson, the issue is behavior and what might need to be changed to prevent future problems for us. "When guilt is appropriate," says Dr. Johnson, "tell yourself that. You might modify intensity with anti-anxiety medications or relaxation exercises—but if the bulk of the guilt feelings are avoided, so will the learning be." In other words, learn from your mistakes. Inappropriate,

excessive guilt, says Dr. Johnson, can be dealt with using "hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery, NLP, Reiki, etc. . . . The focus of the self-help stuff should be on letting one's self grow from experience," he says, "trusting in one's own ability to be a better person, allowing one's self permission to make mistakes and go through losses, trusting in some form of higher power, etc."

People come up with all kinds of ways to rid themselves of guilt feelings. One of the strangest I found on the internet, one with a New Age flavor, was Aromatherapy Angelic Bath Kits provided by Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc.{11} All one needs to do is pour some special herbs and oils in the tub, climb in, and read some prescribed meditations to "foster positive thoughts and reinforcements."{12} One of these kits is a "ritual to clear feelings of guilt." We're asked, "Who hasn't felt guilty in their lives? Who doesn't still feel guilty about something? There are two kinds of guilt: good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt is when you have truly done something that you feel remorse for. Bad guilt is for the rest." The forgiveness kit includes "special mixtures [which] help wash the guilty feeling away." Notice that "good guilt" has to do with things "you feel remorse for," not necessarily for things that are truly wrong. It's your feelings about such things that matter.{13} This may seem silly to you. Who would even bother with such a thing? we wonder. But people do.

Somehow, such remedies don't seem to be working. Maybe it's because we can't rid ourselves of the knowledge Paul said we have by nature: a knowledge of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).

Sin and Guilt According to God

What does God say about sin and guilt? Briefly put, God has declared us guilty of violating His holy law by our sin and deserving of eternal banishment from His presence. Contrary to current opinion, there is transcendent law that has been

broken and for which there must be payment.

Imagine that someone has done something to offend you, and his reaction to your complaint is something like, “Yeah, that really bothered me, too. But I’ve forgiven myself of that, and I’m fine with it now.” This is only a slight caricature of the mentality we all encounter today. The person clearly has missed the point that there was a real, objective violation against you!

The message of the cross is that there is a very real fracture in our relationship with God. We’re told in Scripture that there is nothing we can do to make up for what we’ve done. Is there anything to offer us hope?

There is: the cross of Christ, “the race’s historic crisis and turning-point,” says Forsyth.{14} The cross dealt with our greatest need, namely, redemption. Humanists of a secular stripe who trumpeted the inevitable progress of humanity saw our fundamental nature as one of ordered process. The truth, though, is that it is “tragic collision and despair.” All of man’s efforts have been unable to reach down into the depths of our sinfulness and bring about fundamental change. All except that of the God-man Jesus Christ, who attacked the moral problem head on to the point of dying on the cross and came out victorious.

Several understandings of the atonement—what Jesus accomplished on the cross—have been offered through history, and several of them have some truth in them. The key aspect of Christ’s cross work was that it satisfied the demand for punishment for our sin. This is called substitutionary atonement: Jesus was substituted for us, so He took the punishment for sin in being separated from God and dying, thus paying the penalty for us. “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul wrote to the Romans that “what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness

of sinful man to be a sin offering." (Romans 8:3) And to the Galatian church he said that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

By His death on the cross, Jesus, the one who "knew no sin, became sin for us." This was done because of His love for us: "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2; Rom. 5:8) Jesus' sacrifice is appropriated by faith: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul wrote (Eph. 2:8). By putting our faith in Him, we participate in the payment He made. It counts for those who believe it and who receive Him.

I should note quickly, however, that the reality of our objective guilt isn't dependent upon our subjective guilt. In other words, whether we feel guilty or not, we are. And because we are guilty of violating God's law, we must do more than just forgive ourselves as we're taught today. We must, and may, participate in God's solution through Christ.

The Moral Triumph of the Cross

What I've been talking about is the judicial aspect of the cross work of Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

However, this payment isn't to be thought of like making a payment to the utility company for electricity. All that matters is that the money gets there. What it takes to get it there isn't really significant. The cross, by contrast, was a triumph over sin; it was a moral victory in itself. Jesus overcame evil through His perfect obedience and righteousness; "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," Paul wrote (Rom. 5:18). His death on the cross was the capstone of a life of moral victories over sin and Satan.

We're so used to thinking about Jesus as God and as sinless that we don't often think about His obedience. He said and did the things the Father told Him (Jn. 5:19, 30; 8:28). To the Jews he said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." (v. 4) Before He gave up His spirit on the cross, Jesus knew that "all things had already been accomplished." (Jn 19:28) He fulfilled the law perfectly (Matt. 5:17), and thus put the basis of our salvation on our faith in him as the one who did so, thus robbing the law of its power to encourage us to sin (cf. Rom. 8:2-4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). Jesus had defeated Satan; He had not given in to any temptation to not give up His life. He was obedient to death. (Phil. 2:8). And by His obedience He was made perfect or complete and able to be the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9; see also 2:10; 5:8; and Rom. 5:19).

P.T. Forsyth wrote that the cross "is the moral victory which recovered the universe. The Vindicator has stood on the earth," he said. "It is the eternal victory in history of righteousness, of holiness, of the moral nature and character of God as Love."{15} He continued:

> The most anomalous thing, the most poignant and potent crisis that ever happened or can happen in the world, is the death of Christ; the whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil met there for good and all. And to faith that death is the last word of the holy omnipotence of God.{16}

What is the significance of Jesus' cross work—indeed, His whole life—as a moral victory? Forsyth said that in creating the world, God revealed His omnipotence, His absolute power. In the new creation inaugurated through the cross, He revealed

His moral power, His ability to triumph over His worst enemy, Satan, and the sin that infects His creation. God's power has been revealed as "moral majesty, as holy omnipotence" said Forsyth. "The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of a God but of a holy God."{17}

In the cross and resurrection, we see that good can triumph over evil now, and we have the promise that one day that triumph will be complete. Not only us but all of creation will be set free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-24).

But this isn't just a promise for the future. Because, like Jesus, we have the Spirit living in us, we can live in obedience to God; we can stand firm in the presence of the evil that wages war against us (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20). The cross bears witness to that.

The secular humanism and new spiritualism of our day have no resources for affecting us so deeply on the moral level. Christianity does—the cross of Christ—and it is this that makes it relevant for our day and for all time.

A Fully-Engaged God

It's easy to think of God as remote from us, as a judge way up there making His laws and wreaking vengeance on anyone who violates them. We hear about the love of God, but how does love fit in with a God of judgment? And if God does love us, how does He show it? Love comes near; it isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Is God willing to come near? To get His hands dirty with us?

In the cross of Jesus we see both the judgment of God and His love. Herein lies its beauty. In the cross we find a God who does not stand afar off, but takes on the worst of what His own law requires! He has pronounced judgment, but He so much wants us saved that He is willing to take on the burden of paying for it Himself. "For God so loved the world that He

gave His Son," says John (3:16).

In all the brouhaha surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, one complaint heard several times was that a God who would put His Son through that isn't a God to be worshipped.{18} But Jesus did this freely. "No one takes [my life] from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn.10:18). And He did this knowing that as He laid His life down, so also would He take it up again (Jn.10:17). For the joy set before Him, He took up the cross (Heb. 12:2).

We wonder if God can reach us in the messiness of our lives. But God is no stranger to mess. The Bible reveals a God who isn't afraid to get dirty, who engages life even with all kinds of difficulties it may bring. This message is appealing in our day especially, to GenXers who have suffered the fallout of the excesses of earlier generations. The optimism Boomers inherited from their parents fizzled out for a lot of their children. Regarding that generation, Tom Beaudoin says this:

> I have witnessed a sadness and anger about the generation's suffering and dysfunction, a suffering that—whatever its economic reasons may be—expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism. Xers' relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. . . . Suffering is a catalyst for GenX religiosity.{19}

While they often reject the form of religion their parents embraced, many GenXers have a fascination and respect for Jesus, for his suffering didn't make sense, and yet it was redemptive.{20}

Here the true awesomeness of the cross is made plain. God, who deserves all glory and is so far above us in holiness and

purity, became man, and endured horrific torture at the hands of people He created . . . for their benefit! The life and death of Christ make plain that God was willing to roll up his sleeves and engage life on earth fully, even accepting the worst it had to offer.

But, one might wonder, since Christ took on evil and won, shouldn't we be done with suffering? Eventually it will end. In the meantime we, too, learn obedience through what we suffer. If that was Jesus' way of learning, and the servant isn't above his master (Matt. 10:24), can we expect anything else? Furthermore, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that hardship isn't just an inconvenience on the road of discipleship. Redemption wasn't brought about in spite of the cross but through it.{21} Likewise, our growth comes not in spite of hardship but through it.

Someone who has suffered for many years might complain that Jesus' suffering doesn't compare. Jesus' sufferings and resurrection spanned a short period of time. But what He suffered was the experience of the weight of the guilt of the whole world on the shoulders of one who was sinless. It isn't anything new for us to feel guilt; we can become somewhat hardened to it. But Jesus felt it to the fullest extent imaginable. This isn't to mention the hurt of the betrayal of Judas (and to a lesser extent, of Peter). Worse yet, He experienced separation from the Father, the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Jesus knew suffering.

In the cross and resurrection we see what God has promised to do for us in a compressed timeframe. But what happened to Jesus will happen for all who believe. He suffered . . . and He arose. We suffer . . . and we will rise.

Jesus allowed people to see what God is like. He not only taught truth, he lived it. People could touch Him, and feel Him touch them. They could see how He lived and how He died. The cross was a real, live illustration of love.

In Jesus, people saw goodness and love demonstrated even toward those who persecuted Him. That should be no surprise, because it was just that kind of person Jesus came to die for! Sin was overcome through a love that gave all. This is the meaning and the message of the cross, the message we, too, are to take to our world.

Notes

1. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 28ff.

2. Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 15.

3. P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 17.

4. Forsyth, 18.

5. Forsyth, 19.

6. Arthur C. Custance, *The Doorway Papers,* vol. 3, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1975), 267.

7. Custance, 274.

8. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 17.

9. Custance, 273.

10. Dr. Glenn Johnson, head-cleaners.com, www.head-cleaners.com/guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

11. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/wellness_about.htm (February 17, 2004).

12. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/ritual_package.htm (February 17, 2004).

13. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/rituals_guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

14. Forsyth, 19.

15. Forsyth, 121.

16. Forsyth, 122.

17. See Forsyth, 123.

18. See for example the comment by Kip Taylor in Susan Hogan/Albach, "The Purpose of the Passion," *The Dallas Morning News,* Feb. 21, 2004, 1G.

19. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 99.

20. Beaudoin, 99.

21. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

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"My Prof Says Jesus Never Intended to Form a New Church"

I am a Christian and I attend a public college. One of my professors told our class that Jesus was a Jew who never intended (desired) to form a new Church (apart from the Jewish synagogue). Is this true? What does it mean for Gentiles like

me? I have always been taught that because Jesus came and died and was resurrected all people who accept Him can enter into the kingdom? I believe God exists and I believe Jesus Christ truly was the Son of God, but I want to be able to justify my beliefs.

I'm glad you're thinking about these things and not just letting them slip by or, even worse, simply accepting your professor's claims as truth just because he is a professor. I'm curious to know what subject the professor teaches.

It's obviously true that Jesus was Jewish. God formed the Jewish race through Abraham to be the people through whom He would send the Messiah, and Jesus was in the line of David, the great Jewish king.

Did Jesus intend to form a new church? Yes, but not as something totally new. It was to be, rather, the fulfillment of all that had gone before, sort of like a bulb coming to full flower. That it was linked with the past is seen in Matt. 5: 17,18 where Jesus said the Law had to be fulfilled, and in other passages in the Gospels which refer to the event of the coming of Christ as fulfilling some aspect of Old Testament teaching (8:17; 12:17ff; Mark 14:49; Luke 21:22ff), and in Heb. 1 where we read of the revelation of God to man, previously through the prophets, but now through the Son: one God revealing more of His plans by a different means. That it was new was indicated clearly by Jesus when He spoke of the Jews trying to put "old wine in new wineskins" (Matt. 9:17). In Mark 1: 27 we read where the Jews realized He brought "new teaching with authority." What was new was the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus and the revelation of salvation through faith in Him. The Law had been like a tutor teaching people about God and about our own sin and need for forgiveness. It was intended to prepare people for Christ (Gal. 3:24).

We Gentiles were always in God's mind for salvation through Christ (Matt. 12:18; cf. Isaiah 42:1). When Philip and Andrew

brought a couple of Greeks to see Jesus, He said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Now the word was reaching the Gentiles, too. In Romans 9:30 through chap. 10, Paul talks about the Gospel reaching Gentiles as well as Jews.

My guess is that your professor would respond to this by arguing that the New Testament was written a long time after Christ, and that its message was constructed by people who wanted to make a new religion with Jesus as its founder. The case I have presented can only be argued from Scripture, for God’s plan is made known through revelation; it cannot be reasoned to philosophically (although once known it can be understood, perhaps, a little more thoroughly and clearly by reasoning). So if the professor denies the validity of the New Testament as the revealed Word of God, another argument must be made for that.

Here are links for a few articles on our Web site that will provide some help with that issue:

- *Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?*
- *Authority of the Bible*
- *The Christian Canon*

Thanks again for writing. I hope this helps.

Rick Wade

Probe Ministries

Hindrances of the Mind: The

Scandal of Evangelical Thinking

Sometimes our presuppositions skew our understanding of Scripture and even how to use it. Rick Wade looks at some ideas and attitudes from our past that create hindrances to sound thinking.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

In our efforts to engage our society for Christ, we need to understand that people often don't see the world aright because of problems with the way they think. Their beliefs or attitudes—or even what they think about *thinking*—create stumbling blocks. But lest we get too puffed up, we need to recognize that we aren't immune to that ourselves; Christians don't always think well, either.

Before we can effectively engage our society on this level we need to engage ourselves. We wonder why, with so many people professing faith today, we aren't able to have a greater impact on our society. It's often said that we aren't *doing* enough. Another reason is that we aren't *thinking* enough.

Some time ago evangelicals lost significance in the intellectual centers of the country. Historian Mark Noll notes that "on any given Sunday in the United States and Canada, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice, yet in neither country do these great numbers of practicing evangelicals appear to play significant roles in either nation's intellectual life."{1} Apart from concerns about Christians in academia, however, the rest of us should consider our own habits of thinking. I'm not speaking about the simple attainment of knowledge; I'm talking about how certain attitudes and assumptions affect how we think.

This article is a brief examination of the evangelical mind today. What are some weaknesses in evangelical thinking that stunt our influence in society? How did we get to this place?

Noll names four characteristics of American evangelicals, our legacy from the nineteenth century: *populism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *intuitionism*. By *populism,* he means that evangelical Christians see the strength of the church (on the human level, of course) as residing in the people in the pews rather than those in the pulpits. By *activism,* he refers to the lack of patience for extended contemplation and the desire to be about the work of the Lord. *Biblicism* refers to the belief that truth is only found in Scripture. *Intuitionism* refers to the tendency to go with gut-level responses rather than studying matters with any thoroughness.

For all the possibilities this form of Christianity offers, insofar as this description is accurate, it leaves little room for the life of the mind. Yes, it's important that we *do* things for the Lord. But don't we need to *think* before we *do*? Could one of the things we need to *do* be to *think*? The Bible is indeed our final authority, but is knowledge obtainable elsewhere? And is intuition sufficient for understanding what the Bible writers meant given the fact that they wrote in another time and cultural context? Or for understanding the complex issues of our day—or even the perennial issues of the human experience?

Someone might still be wondering if this is really an important issue. As long as we're doing God's work, why do we need to waste time worrying over a lot of ivory tower speculation? Read what Noll says as he summarizes the importance of the life of the mind for the church:

> *Where Christian faith is securely rooted, where it penetrates deeply into a culture to change individual lives and redirect institutions, where it continues for more than a generation as a living testimony to the grace of God—in these*

> *situations, we almost invariably find Christians ardently cultivating the intellect for the glory of God.*

He continues: “The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church.” What results when serious thinking isn’t a characteristic of the church? “The path to danger is not always the same,” he says, “but the results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses into gross error, or simply passes out of existence.”{2}

Did you catch that? This is no minor issue. To say that what is eternal is all that’s important, that we needn’t waste a lot of time on the things of this world which is destined to burn up anyway, might seem to reflect biblical teaching, but it doesn’t. We aren’t here suggesting that the things of the earth in themselves are more important than the things of heaven. Neither are we saying everyone has to be a scholar. What we’re saying is that we need to think, we need to learn, we need to understand the world we live in if we want to be taken seriously and in turn more strongly influence the world around us. Some of us *should* be scholars, however, and scholars who can command the respect of peers both inside and outside the church. But all of us need to learn to think well on whatever level we live. We should learn *about* the world, and we should learn *from* the world. There is value in this world because it was created by God, because it is the arena in which redemption was accomplished, because it is where we live out our Christianity each day, and because it is where we meet unbelievers and seek to reach them for Christ. Our investment is in heaven, but it is here where we work out our salvation.

So, how did we get to our present state? Let’s look at the development of this mentality in our nation’s short history.

Pietism

Two factors from our past, which had and still have ramifications for the evangelical mind, were Pietism and populism.

Pietism had its roots in the late seventeenth century in Europe as a reaction to the cold, formalistic ritualism so prevalent in the church. Christianity seemed more a topic of philosophical speculation and argument than a living religion. Philipp Jakob Spener, a German pastor, sought reform in the lives of the people in the pews. He "instituted [pious assemblies] to meet on Wednesdays and Sundays to pray, to discuss the previous week's sermon, and to apply passages from Scripture and devotional writings to individual lives."{3} In 1675, Spener wrote *Pia Desideria (*or, *Pious Wishes)* in which he outlined his ideas for reform. They included a renewed emphasis on the Bible, the revival of the priesthood of the believer, an emphasis on Christian practice, and the preaching of understandable sermons.

Pietism spread in several directions as the years passed. The Moravians, who significantly influenced John Wesley, "carried the pietistic concern for personal spirituality almost literally around the world." Pietism was influential among Mennonites, Brethren, and Dutch Reformed Christians. Its ideas can be seen in the teachings of Cotton Mather and William Law, and in the preaching of the American Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century.

Pietism had the effect of shifting the locus of authority away from tradition and the established church leadership to the individual Christian. Not everyone was in favor of this. Some church leaders opposed the movement for selfish reasons, but some were genuinely concerned about the possibility of "rampant subjectivity and anti-intellectualism." Separationism was another problem. Although Spener never called for it, some people did separate from the established churches.

On the positive side, one finds in Pietism a strong commitment to Scripture, the rejection of cold orthodoxy, and an emphasis on authentic personal experience. Says Noll, "It was, in one sense, the Christian answer to what has been called the discovery of the individual' by providing a Christian form to the individualism and practical-mindedness of a Europe in transition to modern times." Pietism has been a source of renewal in cold churches, an encouragement to lay people to get involved in ministry, and an impulse for individuals to always be seeking after God.

On the negative side, however, Pietism led to subjectivism and emotionalism. It provided an excuse for anti-intellectualism and for the neglect of careful scholarship. Lessons learned by Christians in previous centuries no longer needed to be considered since one's present experience with God was the most important thing. Lastly, it inclined some people to establish rather legalistic codes of morality as they sought evidence of spirituality in others' lives.

A surprising result of Pietism—given its primary goal of bringing Christians more into the light of truth—was the way it led *away* from truth. Noll notes that

> Unchecked Pietism . . . played a role in the development of theological liberalism with liberalism's fascination for the forms of religious experience. It played a part in developing the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where a vague nature mysticism replaced a more orthodox understanding of God and the world. And for more orthodox believers, Pietism sometimes led to a morbid fixation upon the Christian's personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach. . . . The Pietist attack on self-conscious Christian thinking . . . meant the weakening of the faith toward sentimentality, its captivity by alien philosophies, or its decline to dangerous modernisms.{4}

While Pietism had (and has) its positive aspects, with respect to the life of the mind, it has had a detrimental effect. The emphasis on the individual makes the rest of the world less important, and it provides no incentive to be open to anything but the individual's own spirituality.

Populism

The second factor which continues to affect the way we think is America's populist mentality. *Populism* is a concern for "the perceived interests of ordinary people, as opposed to those of a privileged elite."{5} Although populism didn't form into a political movement until the late nineteenth century, it characterized the mentality of Americans from the early days of our country's history.

Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that, "In the original American populistic dream, the omnicompetence of the common man was fundamental and indispensable."{6} Class differences were rejected; egalitarianism was the new order of things. Hofstadter says that early exponents of popular democracy "meant . . . to subordinate educated as well as propertied leadership. . . . [popular democracy] reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and the well-to-do."{7} In fact, there developed a real bias against and a distrust of the elite, such as churchmen who were part of the hereditary structure of church leadership, and academicians.

Anti-Intellectualism

In the early days of America's founding, there was an attitude of sticking to the basic things of life. According to this way of thinking, "there is a persistent preference of the 'wisdom' of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial."{8}

This confidence in the intuitive wisdom of the common man, together with the distrust of the educated elite, produced in America a distinct anti-intellectualism. "Anti-intellectualism," in Hofstadter's use, does not necessarily mean "unintelligent." He defines it as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life."{9} Intelligence *per se* isn't a problem . . . as long as it is being put to practical use. But the contemplation of ideas which have no immediately discernible practical use is thought to be a waste of time.

Still today, the word "intellectual" usually carries negative connotations. "Intellectual" and "ivory tower" are two terms often heard together, and they aren't complimentary descriptions! Noll notes that the activistic, pragmatic, and utilitarian "ethos" of America "allows little space for br oader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment."{10} A problem with this mentality is that it demands the distilling of ideas into immediately usable information. Speaking of evangelicals specifically, Canadian scholar N. K. Clifford states the problem bluntly: "The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an over-simplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection. The limitations of such a mind-set were less apparent in the relative simplicity of a rural frontier society." {11} Our world is much more complex today, and it requires more focused, deep, and sustained thinking.

Someone might object that evangelicals have done some serious thinking and writing in some areas of study, and that is certainly true. Apologetics is one area in which that is the case. But as Noll says, "In our past we have much more eagerly leaped to defend the faith than to explore its implications

for the intellectual life."{12} It is one thing to shore up one's own defenses (a worthy project in itself), but quite another to seek to understand the world for its own sake—or even for the sake of enlarging our understanding of God. For those who *are* out in the secular marketplace and in academia, are distinctively Christian beliefs informing their work? Or are they having to leave them at home to make life easier on the job (or to be able to stay in their positions at all)?

Antitraditionalism

In an article on the era of the Enlightenment, I wrote this:

> Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past now had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today? Besides, people in the past were dominated by the church. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.{13}

We were now able to look at the facts for ourselves; we had no need for anyone else to teach us anything. Change was in the air; what was new was what was important, not what happened in the past. Thus was formed the characteristic of *antitraditionalism*.

We assume that, since the world is so much different today, those who've gone on before us have little to say to us since they couldn't imagine a world like ours. We forget that human nature hasn't changed, and that wisdom isn't bound by time or by technological advancement. Nor has God changed through time in keeping with our advancement! We can learn from those

who've gone on before us about what the Scriptures mean, what God is like, how we can best live lives marked by wisdom, and more.

Evangelism and preaching

What significance did these ideas and attitudes have for the proclamation of the Gospel?

First, with respect to evangelism, the revivalism of the nineteenth century set the tone for popular evangelical thought. *Revivalism* was a movement in Christianity that emphasized the whole-hearted acceptance of the Gospel message *now.* It developed in the eighteenth century and came to full flower in the nineteenth. Revivalism was very populist in tone; the message of salvation was aimed at the broadest audience. Preaching was kept simple and "aimed at an emotional response."{14} The choice was plain: repent and believe the Gospel *today*. Don't wait until tomorrow. There was no need to give sustained thought to the matter, no need to look to others—either contemporaries or those who lived in the past—for insight and understanding about the faith. Salvation was individual and the call to decide was immediate.{15}

As revivalism moved into the South and West, "it became more primitive, more emotional, more given to ecstatic' manifestations."{16} Preachers often adopted the anti-intellectual prejudices of the populace. Adding to the already populist mentality was the fact that pioneers moved west much faster than institutions could follow (including schools). Missionaries "would have been ineffective in converting their moving flocks if they had not been able to develop a vernacular style in preaching, and if they had failed to share or to simulate in some degree the sensibilities and prejudices of their audiences—anti-authority, anti-aristocracy, anti-Eastern, anti-learning."{17}

This prejudice against learning began to harden among both

laity and clergy. Hofstadter explains the characteristic understanding of the relation of faith and learning this way: "One begins with the hardly contestable proposition that religious faith is not, in the main, propagated by logic or learning. One moves on from this to the idea that it is best propagated . . . by men who have been [*sic*] unlearned and ignorant. It seems to follow from this that the kind of wisdom and truth possessed by such men is superior to what learned and cultivated minds have. In fact, learning and cultivation appear to be handicaps in the propagation of faith."{18}

A New Way of Knowing Truth

Pietism and populism served to foster a mentality of subjectivism, antitraditionalism, and anti-intellectualism. To this was added a framework of thought drawing from science and philosophy which significantly affected the way evangelicals thought about their faith and the world.

Within the church, there was a need to find a way to prevent Christian doctrine from becoming a purely individualistic affair following the separation from the Roman Church. If there were ways to prove doctrine objectively true, Christians would have to give assent to it. With respect to society in general, now that science was the source of knowledge, evangelicals felt the need to show that Christianity could stand up to rigorous scientific verification so the church would remain a respected institution. The issue was how we know truth, and how this understanding was to be applied to the interpretation of the Bible.

Although romantic tendencies were becoming more visible in Protestantism during this period, the orientation of conservatives was primarily in the direction of fact rather than feeling. In the eighteenth century a new framework of thought began developing which seemed to answer these needs, and which has strongly influenced the character of evangelical Christianity ever since. This framework had two primary

elements: Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and Baconian science.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy

Although evangelicals rejected the skeptical aspects of the Enlightenment,{19} they accepted with open arms one type of Enlightenment thought known as Scottish Common Sense Realism. Common Sense philosophers believed that everyone has mental faculties that produce beliefs which we rely upon in everyday life, such as the existence of the external world, the reality of other minds, the reliability of our senses, our abilities to reason, our memories, etc. These faculties enable everyone to "grasp the basic realities of nature and morality."{20} These beliefs weren't considered culture-derived or culture-bound; they were the shared experience of all mankind, including the Bible writers.{21}

Historian George Marsden notes that "Common Sense had a special appeal in America because it purported to be an anti-philosophy."{22} It pitted the common person against the speculative philosophers. Evangelicals took to it easily because of its populist appeal, because "it was so intuitive, so instinctual, so much a part of second nature."{23} In fact, this philosophy was so widely embraced in Protestantism that, as one man said, "by most persons [Protestantism and Common Sense] are considered as necessary parts of the same system."{24} "So basic did this reasoning become," says Noll, "that even self-consciously orthodox evangelicals had no qualms about resting the entire edifice of the faith on the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment."{25}

Baconian science

The other component of the framework of thought was the scientific method of Francis Bacon. Bacon advocated a rigorous empiricism, "an inductive method of discovering truth, founded upon empirical observation, analysis of observed data,

inference resulting in hypotheses, and verification of hypotheses through continued observation and experiment."{26} The goal was "objective, disinterested, unbiased, and neutral science."{27} George Marsden says that Scottish Common Sense philosophy provided a basis for faith in this scientific method. On the foundation of common sense we can understand the laws of nature by employing the Baconian method of examining the evidences and classifying the facts.

Evangelicals began to use this method to interpret Scripture. The Bible was seen as a collection of facts which could be understood by anyone of reasonable intelligence just by knowing what the words meant. Across the denominations, Marsden tells us, "there prevailed a faith in immutable truth seen clearly by inductive scientific reasoning in Scripture and nature alike."{28}

Significance for Evangelicals

What was the significance of all this for evangelicals? "By and large, mid-nineteenth-century American theologians were champions of scientific reasoning and scientific advance," says Marsden. "They had full confidence in the capacities of the scientific method for discovering truth exactly and objectively." Conservative Christians took the scientific principles used for studying nature and applied them to the Bible. "To Protestants it seemed evident that the principle for knowing truth in one area of God's revelation should parallel those of another area." This broad acceptance was found across the spectrum of denominations, including Unitarians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists among others. Understanding the Bible became a matter of the commonsensical study of the facts of Scripture. The important question was, What do the words mean? Once that was determined, the Bible could be understood as clearly as could nature.{29}

Here we must pause, however, and ask an important question.

How was it that Christians who took seriously the negative effects of sin on the mind, who tended to emphasize human incapacities and a lack of confidence in human reason, could put so much confidence in a philosophy which depended so highly on reason? The answer is that American society outside the church was repudiating revelation, tradition, and social hierarchy. Baconian Common Sense thought provided a means of defending and promoting traditional values without appealing to such authorities.{30} The desire to make Christianity seem credible in such an environment made it easy to overlook the effects of sin on the mind.

Problems with Common Sense Thought

There were problems with Common Sense thought, however. First, Common Sense was dependent upon a belief in the commonness of our humanity, which, of course, would extend back to the Bible writers. Once the original meaning of the text was understood, the truth was settled. But this created a dilemma, for this understanding of truth as unchanging clashed with the new air of progress and change in the mid-nineteenth century. Shouldn't progress in knowledge affect our interpretation of the Bible, too? {31}

Second, it was supposed that philosophy and science were purely objective disciplines. As one writer notes, however, "The impediments to the use of this method are preconceptions and prejudices."{32} Marsden points out that "science and philosophy operate on various premises—often hidden premises. From a Christian perspective the crucial question is whether these premises reflect a strictly naturalistic outlook or one that may be shaped and guided by data derived from biblical revelation."{33}

It is now widely understood that the scientific method used to study both nature and Scripture isn't neutral; its use doesn't lead everyone to the same conclusions. Why? Because we filter the data through beliefs already held. Regarding the Bible, we

have to understand that it is not simply a book of facts. It is a body of inspired literature written in cultures quite different from ours. What did the authors intend us to understand? How are the various genre of Scripture to be properly interpreted? As already suggested, we have to consider also the preconceptions we bring to the text which influence and are influenced by our reading of it.

The adoption of Baconian Common Sense philosophy for the interpretation of Scripture began to cause evangelicals special problems, primarily in the area of science. The "plain, literal" reading of the text of Genesis 1 and 2 indicated a universe created in six, 24-hour days. It was easy to think, in a time when Christian beliefs were so prevalent, that an honest look at the scientific data would confirm this view. When the data seemed to show otherwise, however, evangelicals had a problem. Should they capitulate and say Genesis was myth? Should they hold fast to their interpretation regardless of the findings of scientists? Should they acknowledge a misinterpretation of the text?

The main point here isn't really the question of the age of the earth. I've used science as an example because it is often the focus of conflict between evangelicals and society. The main point is that evangelicals who based their understanding of the world on an uncritical use of a shaky method of interpretation found themselves at odds with their culture. Earlier I spoke of *biblicism,* the idea that we can only have any confidence in knowledge obtained from Scripture. Evangelicals effectively shut themselves off from any correction that might come from "the book of nature," as it has been called. They made themselves vulnerable by relying on a method which apparently failed them. Says George Marsden:

> Christian apologists . . . were placing themselves in a highly vulnerable position by endorsing the Baconian ideal that the sciences should be completely neutral and freed from religious review at their starting points. . . . Almost

> without warning one wall of their apologetic edifice was removed and within a generation the place of biblical authority in American intellectual life was in a complete shambles.{34}

Because of an unwillingness to allow their interpretation of Scripture to be informed from things learned from nature, evangelicals became separated from the intellectual life of the nation, and effectively removed an orthodox biblical perspective from learning in general.

Evangelicals and the "Book of Nature"

Because of the place of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, the "book of nature" typically takes a subordinate role among evangelicals. Although Scripture should remain supreme as far as our knowledge goes, some problems arise if we become too rigid in our thinking.

One problem is our response when presented with ideas we believe go against Scripture. In our desire to uphold the full truthfulness of the Bible, we reject any ideas outright which seem to contradict it. This determination creates tension in a variety of areas of learning. When people in any field of endeavor make claims we believe conflict with the Bible, we reject them. And rightly so . . . *if* such ideas really *do* conflict with Scripture. Is it Scripture they contradict, or our interpretation of it?

When ideas seem to conflict with the Bible, we need to be sure our interpretation is correct. Centuries ago Christians believed the Bible supported the view that the earth was at the center of the universe.{35} Scientific studies showed that their interpretation of Scripture was incorrect. This wasn't a matter of choosing science over the Bible; it was a matter of allowing the study of nature to correct their wrong interpretation of it.

We hold that the Bible is true in everything it affirms. We

need to keep in mind, however, that the primary purpose of Scripture is to tell about God and His ways and will. There is truth the Bible *doesn't* tell; not truth of a redemptive sort, but truth about this world. In the Bible, one will find nothing about the cause and cure of cancer. When we prepare soldiers for duty, we give them more than what one can find in the Bible. These things are obvious, of course. But what about the possibility of learning more about God from studying the things of this earth? Even if we cannot go beyond Scriptural teaching about the nature of God (for most Protestants still reject the natural theology of the Roman Catholic Church), can we get a bigger and clearer picture of the truths of Scripture from learning about this world? From nature and from the brush of artists we can understand more fully what beauty is. From looking at a chart of the genetic structure of a DNA molecule we stand amazed at the wonder of the natural order. From the study of mankind in anthropology we see more clearly how people exhibit the knowledge of the law "written on our hearts," and how because of sin people come to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Another problem for the life of the mind with respect to the world is the view that the world really isn't very important. It's all going to burn up one day anyway, isn't it? This attitude overlooks some important facts. Scripture tells us that God created the natural order; Jesus accomplished His work of redemption within the natural order; and one day the natural order itself will be restored (cf. Gen. 1:1; Rom. 8:21; and 2 Pet. 3:13). It is God's handiwork, and it is wonderful in spite of its fallenness just for what it contains. It also is the setting within which we work out our salvation every day, and it is where we seek to reach people for Christ. The fact that the world is fallen doesn't mean there is little value in knowing it.

Secular Influences

Evangelicals not only have been influenced by the history of thought in the church over the last couple of centuries, but we're also influenced by secular thought.{36} Major secularizing social forces of the modern era such as social pluralization and the practical demands of industry significantly altered the way we think. With the rise of industry, America developed into a mobile, uprooted society, where production (and therefore efficiency) was of utmost importance. God became less relevant; to many, belief in God was a hindrance. What counted was what worked. A result of this was the privatization of belief. We either lost the nerve or simply lost interest in letting our beliefs significantly influence our daily lives.

I will forego discussion of these matters, however,{37} and briefly mention two significant philosophical influences of the twentieth century, pragmatism and existentialism.

Pragmatism

I've spoken already about the orientation of evangelicalism toward the practical. That attitude, so prevalent among most Americans, developed as a school of philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called *pragmatism,* a philosophy which exerted great influence through our schools.

Pragmatism is concerned with how an idea works out in real life. Knowing the practical consequences of an idea tells us what the concept really *means*. And verifying it in concrete ways shows its *truth*. Pragmatism is concerned with the "cash value" of an idea.{38}

Pragmatism is seen in the evangelical church when Christians see the practical application of a doctrine as the measure of its importance, and when we look with scorn on intellectualism because it's practical usefulness isn't readily apparent.

Existentialism

Another secular influence on evangelicals is the philosophy of *existentialism*.{39} The search for truth was turned inward in the Romantic era, and, as we noted previously, subjectivism was one of the negative results of Pietism. This subjectivity is a core belief of existentialism.

The existentialist chooses for himself what his values will be and hence what he will be. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," said Jean-Paul Sartre. "That is the first principle of existentialism."{40} Values are not imposed from the outside; they are chosen by the individual. To live by others' values is to live in bad faith.

The influence of existentialism is seen among evangelicals when we become the final authority for our values, when we insist that we are responsible for what we are to become, or when we make our own experiences determine the meaning of Scripture. The individual's experience overrides scriptural understanding and becomes authoritative over the teaching of the church past and present.

Reviving the Evangelical Mind

For all its good qualities, evangelicalism since the eighteenth century in America has not made notable contributions to the world of learning. Distinctly evangelical thinking plays little if any role in the intellectual life of our nation, and our knowledge of our own faith sometimes suffers from incorrect thinking about how to know what is true and what the Bible means.

The experiential subjectivism characteristic of extreme Pietism and of secular philosophies such as existentialism separates the individual from the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the church through the ages. It is foolish to set all that aside in favor of what each individual feels or can

figure out himself. “I feel that such-and-such” is how we often begin stating our understanding of a passage of Scripture or of a doctrine. When pressed for reasons for holding that belief, Christians will often just say, “Well, that’s just what I feel it means.” This kind of subjectivism makes the individual his own final authority for truth. The resulting individualism{41} leads to a fragmentation of the church which limits it in presenting a united front in its interaction with the secular world.

Regarding the pragmatic attitude so prevalent in the church, a constant emphasis on workability inclines us away from consideration of deeper matters of the faith which can result in a grade-school level faith. Two problems come to mind. First, a pragmatic approach will never move us into a deep understanding of God. Frankly, there are things about God and His ways that may seem to have no direct practical bearing on us whatsoever. Imagine if my wife begins to tell me some story about her past, something that seems rather inconsequential, and I say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t see the practical significance of that for me or for us. Let’s stick to telling those things about ourselves that have practical application.” That’s no way to build a relationship! Someone might respond that with a little digging I might very well find a practical significance. Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t. Even if I do, the effort will take me further than one will typically go who has a pragmatic attitude. Pragmatism doesn’t incline one to search for meaning; mere instrumentality is usually all that is desired.

Second (building upon the first point), the issues of life are too complex for an elementary understanding of God and His ways and of this world. Hebrews 5:12 and 6:1 advise us to move on from the elementary things. This, of course, refers to biblical/theological truth. With a deeper understanding of God we can gain a better perspective on the world in which we live, and develop a greater wisdom to know how to live in it.

But we also have to understand our world well in order to be able to apply God's wisdom to it. For example, there should be expert Christian economists. Such people would understand God's view of the value of human life and productivity; they would have wisdom gained from reflection on biblical truths about such things as caring for each other, about personal responsibility, about national responsibilities, for that matter. They also would understand the way societies work and the social and political ramifications of particular ways of handing money. Clearly, workability is important here, but so are bigger issues such as the meaning of work, the responsibility of one person for another, and the care of the resources God has made available for us to make a living. A deep knowledge of God *and* of the world He created are necessary to do this.

Evangelicals can and should make significant contributions to the life of the mind in America. How can we expect to be taken seriously if the faith we confess is seen as "privately engaging, but publicly irrelevant"? Recall what Noll said: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." Some Christians would insist that evangelism is our most important work. But even upon that view, why should we expect anyone to take the message we preach seriously if we come across as backwards in our thinking? Our emphasis on the practical, and our aversion to intellectual pursuits will continue to stunt our influence in academia and in society in general.

It's possible to be both "too earthly minded to be any heavenly good," and "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." We need to be tuned in to both. In my emphasis on understanding our world, and on being aware that knowledge gained from this world can in some instances correct our interpretation of Scripture, I'm not advocating a capitulation

to the deliverances of intellectuals in any given field even if they contradict Scripture. I'm advocating a responsible use of the minds we've been given. We can engage the life of the mind, or we can continue to sink into obscurity. The first option is the more God-honoring one.

Notes

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

2. Noll, 43,44.

3. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Pietism," by M.A. Noll. Unless noted otherwise, quotations in the next few paragraphs are all from this article.

4. Noll, *Scandal*, 49.

5. Encarta Online Dictionary, http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryHome.aspx.

6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 34.

7. Hofstadter, 154.

8. Hofstadter, 48.

9. Hofstadter, 7. For an overview of the subject of anti-intellectualism from an evangelical view, see J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in The Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 19-40.

10. Noll, *Scandal,* 12.

11. N.K. Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion 2* (1973): 323; quoted

in Noll, *Scandal,* 12-13.

12. Noll, *Scandal,* 5.

13. Rick Wade, "Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church," Probe Ministries, 2001.

14. Noll, *Scandal,* 61.

15. Cf. Noll, *Scandal,* 63.

16. Hofstadter, 74.

17. Hofstadter, 80.

18. Hofstadter, note 8, 48-49.

19. For an introduction to the Enlightenment, see Rick Wade, "The Enlightenment and Belief in God," Probe Ministries, 2002.

20. Noll, *Scandal,* 85.

21. George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 83.

22. Marsden, 82.

23. Noll, *Scandal,* 88.

24. James Marsh, in his introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (London, 1840), 40; quoted in Marsden, 82.

25. Noll, *Scandal,* 93.

26. Dagobert Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

27. Noll, 127.

28. Marsden, 82.

29. Marsden, 80-84.

30. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 87.

31. Cf. Marsden, 91-92.

32. Runes, ed., *Dictionary*, s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

33. Marsden, 94.

34. Ibid.

35. For a brief review of this conflict, see Rick Wade, "Modern Myths," Probe Ministries, 2001. For a longer treatment online, see George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," available on the Web at http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0005.html.

36. That these two are so closely intertwined doesn't prevent us from separating them for purposes of understanding the way we think today.

37. Cf. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

38. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 160.

39. For a brief introduction to existentialism, see Rick Wade, Worldviews, Pt. 2, Probe Ministries, 2000, and Todd Kappelman, The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge, Probe Ministries, 1998. Note that here I am speaking of atheistic existentialism.

40. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1972), 291.

41. For a discussion of individualism, see James W. Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 75-88.

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The Doctrine of Revelation: How God Reveals His Nature and His Will

Rick Wade considers how God reveals his nature and his will to mankind. He finds that God clearly speaks to us through His creation and through His thoughts communicated in special revelation (includes His spoken word, His written word, and His Son).

Revelation and the God Who Speaks

Some years ago the pastor of the church I attended was on a nationally syndicated radio program with another pastor of a more liberal bent. They were discussing differences of understanding about Christianity, one of which was the nature of the Bible. My pastor asserted that Scripture is the inspired, revealed Word of God. The other pastor disagreed, saying that the Bible is a collection of the religious reflections of a particular group of people. Since it was a call-in program, I phoned at that point and asked the question, "If the Bible is just the religious ideas of a group of people and isn't from God, how can we know whether what *we* think is true Christianity is what *God* thinks it is?" The pastor said something about how we have other ways of knowing truth, and the program ended. Not a very satisfying answer.

The issue being dealt with was the nature of Scripture. Is it the religious reflection of sincere people expressing truth about God the best they can? Or is it the revealed word of God?

In another article I dealt with the matter of the inspiration of Scripture. In this article I want to look at the doctrine of revelation. Not the *book*, Revelation, at the end of the New Testament, but the *doctrine* of revelation.

Revelation: What makes the Bible more than just religious writings

What *is* revelation? New Testament scholar Leon Morris quotes *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.* Revelation, it says, is "'The disclosure of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency', and secondly, 'Something disclosed or made known by divine or supernatural means.'" Says Morris:

> *Theologians might hesitate over this concentration on knowledge, for some of them would certainly prefer to define revelation in terms of the disclosure of a person. But the point on which we fasten our attention is the word 'disclosure'. Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover.{1}*

Thus, revelation is knowledge we can have no other way than by being told.

Here one might ask the question, Does it make sense to think God might reveal Himself? What we see in Scripture is a God Who speaks. God walked and talked with Adam in the "cool of the day" (Gen. 2:8ff). Later, He spoke to Abraham and then to

the prophets of Israel. In the Incarnation of Christ He spoke directly, as man to man, face to face. Along the way He inspired His prophets and apostles to write His words to man.

This makes perfect sense. First, we know things in keeping with their nature. So, for example, we know the color of something by looking at it. We know distances by measuring. We know love by the good it produces. Along the same lines, we know persons by what they reveal about themselves. God is a Person, and there are things we can only know about Him if He tells us Himself. Second, God is transcendent, high above us. We cannot know Him unless He condescends to speak to us. Third, since God created rational, communicative beings, the idea that He would communicate with them in a rational way is not unreasonable.

Today, people look here and there for answers to the big questions of life—some consciously looking for God, some just looking for any truth on which they can depend. The doctrine of revelation teaches us that rather than wait for us to find God, God has found us. And He has revealed Himself to us in words we can understand.

General Revelation

Revelation comes to us in two basic forms: general or natural revelation, and special revelation. Let’s look at the first of these.

Through what has been made

General revelation is God’s Word given through the created order. Everyone is exposed to general revelation just by virtue of living in and being part of creation. In Psalm 19 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice

goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (vv. 1–4). This idea is reiterated in Romans 1 where Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature— have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (v. 20). Says Leon Morris, "A reverent contemplation of the physical universe with its order and design and beauty tells us not only that God is but also that God is a certain kind of God."{2}

If God can be known through creation in general, then it's reasonable to think He can be known through man himself in particular as part of the created order. God has left His imprint on those made in His image. Theologian Bruce Demarest follows John Calvin in his belief that we all have an immediate knowledge of God based on our being made in His image and on common grace.{3} Our own characteristics of personality, rationality and morality say something about God.

What can be known through general revelation

What do we know about God through general revelation? Demarest says that through nature we know that God is uncreated (Acts 17:24), the Creator (Acts 14:15), the Sustainer (Acts 14:16; 17:25), the universal Lord (Acts 17:24), self-sufficient (Acts 17:25), transcendent (Acts 17:24), immanent (Acts 17:26–27), eternal (Ps. 93:2), great (Ps. 8:3–4), majestic (Ps. 29:4), powerful (Ps. 29:4; Rom. 1:20), wise (Ps. 104:24), good (Acts 14:17), and righteous (Rom. 1:32); He has a sovereign will (Acts 17:26), has standards of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15), and should be worshiped (Acts 14:15;17:23).{4} Furthermore, we all have some knowledge of God's morality through nature (Rom. 2:15).

Other religions

It is because of general revelation that other religions often contain some truth about God. Remember that Paul said everyone

knows God exists through what He has made, but that this knowledge is suppressed by our unrighteousness. They "exchanged the truth of God for a lie," he said, "and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1: 25). Nonetheless, snippets of truth can be detected in non-Christian religions. "For example," writes Bruce Demarest, "the Yoruba people of Nigeria have a name for God, 'Osanobwa,' that means 'he who blesses and sustains the world.' The Taro people, also of Nigeria, after a time of barrenness often call a baby girl 'Nyambien,' meaning 'God is good.' The Ibo people of Nigeria denote God as 'Eze-elu,' or 'the King above.' And the Mende people of Liberia designate God as the Chief, the King of all Kings.{5} The Gogo people of West Africa believe that Mulungu governs 'the destiny of man sending rain and storm, well-being and famine, health or disease, peace or war. He is the Healer.'{6} The Yoruba people say that in the afterlife the person-soul, the Oli, will give account of itself before Olodumare the supreme God. Since, as anthropologists testify, these convictions appear to have been arrived at apart from Christian or Muslim teaching, they must derive from God's universal general revelation in nature, providence, and the implanted moral law."{7}

What can't be known

If all this *can* be known through nature, is there anything that *can't*? Yes there is. Although through nature we can know some things *about* God, we cannot know how to get to *know* God personally, how to find redemption and reconciliation. This is why there had to be *special* revelation.

Special Revelation

As I have noted, God has revealed Himself through nature, but through nature we cannot know how to be reconciled to God. God had to speak in a special way to tell us how we may be redeemed. "Special revelation is redemptive revelation," says Carl Henry. "It publishes the good tidings that the holy and

merciful God promises salvation as a divine gift to man who cannot save himself (OT) and that he has now fulfilled that promise in the gift of his Son in whom all men are called to believe (NT). The gospel is news that the incarnate Logos has borne the sins of doomed men, has died in their stead, and has risen for their justification. This is the fixed center of special redemptive revelation."{8}

Personal

What is the nature of special revelation? First we should note that it is the communication of one Person to other persons. It isn't simply a series of propositions setting forth a theological system. This is why special revelation finds its culmination in Jesus, for in Him we are confronted with the Person of God. We'll talk more about this later.

Verbal and Propositional

It has been the understanding of the church historically that God has spoken verbally to His creatures. Words have been exchanged; rational ideas have been put forward in understandable sentences. Not *all* revelation is easy to understand, of course. Meaning is sometimes shrouded in mystery. But important truths are made clear.

That God would reveal Himself through verbal revelation isn't surprising. First, He is a *Person*, and persons communicate with other persons with a desire to extend and receive information. Second, His clear desire is to make friends with us. He wants to restore us to a proper relationship with Him. It's hard to imagine a friendship between two people who don't communicate clearly with one another.

Implicit in this understanding of revelation is the belief that it contains propositional truths; that is, statements that are informative and have truth value.

This isn't to say the Bible is only propositions. Douglas

Groothuis notes that it also contains questions, imperatives, requests, and exclamations. However, in the words of Carl Henry: "Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these [biblical] writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false."{9} So when Jeremiah says that God "has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!" (32:17), we know that the image of God's "arm" speaks of His power active in His creation. The truth "God acts with power in His creation" is behind the imagery.

Modern ideas

In recent centuries, however, as confidence in man's reason overshadowed confidence in God's ability to communicate, the understanding of revelation has undergone change. Some hold that revelation is to be understood in terms of *personal encounter,* of God encountering people so as to leave them with a "liberating assurance. . . .This assurance – 'openness to the future', Bultmann called it – was equated with faith."{10} Such an encounter can come as a result of reading Scripture, but Scripture itself isn't the verbal revelation of God. Even in evangelical churches where the Bible is preached as God's Word written, people sometimes put more faith in their "relationship" with God than in what God has said. "Don't worry me with doctrine," is the attitude. "I just want to have a relationship with Jesus." It's fine to have a relationship with Jesus. But try to imagine a relationship between two people here on earth in which no information is exchanged.

Those who hold this view draw a line between the personal and the propositional as if they cannot mix. In his evaluation, J.I. Packer says that this is an absurd idea.

> *"Revelation is certainly more than the giving of theological information, but it is not and cannot be less. Personal friendship between God and man grows just as human*

> *friendships do – namely, through talking; and talking means making informative statements, and informative statements are propositions. . . . To say that revelation is non-propositional is actually to depersonalize it. . . . To maintain that we may know God without God actually speaking to us in words is really to deny that God is personal, or at any rate that knowing Him is a truly personal relationship."{11}*

Another idea about the Bible in particular which has become commonplace in liberal theology is that the Bible is the product of the inspired ideas of men (a "quickening of conscience"{12}) rather than truths inspired by God. If this were the case, however, one might expect the Bible to give hints that it is just the religious reflections of men. But the witness of Scripture throughout is that it is the message of God *from* God. Here we don't see men simply reflecting on life and the world and drawing conclusions about God. Rather, we're confronted by a God who steps into people's lives, speaking words of instruction or promise or condemnation.

Modes of Special Revelation

Special revelation has taken different forms: the spoken Word, the written Word, and the Word made flesh.

Spoken Word

In the Garden of Eden, God spoke to Adam directly. (Gen. 3:8ff) He spoke to Abraham (e.g. Gen. 12:1–3), to Moses (Ex. 3:4ff), and to many prophets of the nation of Israel following that. Amos said that God did nothing "without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. . . . The Lord has spoken," he said. "Who can but prophesy?" (3:7–8) Prophets were primarily forth-tellers, relaying God's Word to those for whom it was intended.{13}

Written word

God also had His prophets write down what He said. The writings of Moses were kept in the Tabernacle (Dt. 31:24–26), read in the hearing of the Israelites (Dt. 31:11), and kept as references by future kings of Israel (Dt. 17:18ff). They are quoted throughout the OT (Josh. 1:7; 1 Kings 2:3; Mal.4:4). Joshua put his teachings of God's ordinances with "the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:26), and Samuel did the same (1 Sam. 10:25). The writer of Chronicles spoke of those earlier writings (1 Chron. 29:29), and later, Daniel referred to these books (Dan. 9:2,6,11). Solomon's proverbs and songs are mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32. The writing of the New Testament took a much shorter time than the Old Testament, so we don't see generations down the line referring back to the writings of their fathers. But we do see Peter speaking of the writings of Paul (2 Pe. 3:15–16), and Paul referring (it appears) to Luke's writings in 1 Tim. 5:18.

Word made flesh

So God has spoken, and His words have been written down. The third mode is the Word made flesh. The writer of Hebrews says that, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . ." (1:1-2a) All God's will wasn't given at once; it came in portions at various times. J.I. Packer says, "Then, in New Testament times, just as all roads were said to lead to Rome, so all the diverse and seemingly divergent strands of Old Testament revelation were found to lead to Jesus Christ."{14}

Jesus has been the mediator of revelation since the beginning. "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27) Peter says it was the Spirit of Christ who spoke through the Old Testament prophets. (1 Pe. 1:11) But these were God's words given through men. In the Incarnation we received the fullest expression of His word directly. Jesus was and is the Word made flesh. (John 1:1,14)

Jesus is the supreme revelation because He is one with the Father: He is God speaking. He spoke the words the Father taught Him. (John 12:49; 14:10), and He summed up his ministry with the phrase "I have given them your word." (John 17:14) Abraham Kuyper summed it up beautifully: "Christ does not argue, he *declares;* he does not demonstrate, he *shows* and *illustrates*; he does not analyze, but with enrapturing symbolism *unveils* the truth."{15}

But Jesus doesn't reveal God just in His words but also in His person – in His character and the way He lived. Says the late Bernard Ramm: "The attitudes, action, and dispositions of Christ so mirrored the divine nature that to have seen such in Christ is to have seen the reflection of the divine nature." He continues:

> *Christ's attitudes mirror the Father's attitudes; Christ's affections mirror the Father's affections; Christ's love mirrors the Father's love. Christ's impatience with unbelief is the divine impatience with unbelief. Christ's wrath upon hypocrisy is the divine wrath upon hypocrisy. Christ's tears over Jerusalem is the divine compassion over Jerusalem. Christ's judgment upon Jerusalem or upon the Pharisees is the divine judgment upon such hardness of heart and spiritual wickedness.{16}*

As the Son spoke the Word of the Father so clearly because He knows perfectly the mind of the Father, so He also reflected the character of the Father being of the same nature.

In Christ, also, we see revelation as *event.* He carried out the will of the Father, thus revealing things about the Father. The cross not only accomplished our redemption; it also demonstrated the love of God. Jesus revealed God's glory in changing the water to wine in Cana (John 2:11) and in His resurrection (Rom. 6:4).

The total redeeming work of Christ, therefore, revealed the

Father in word, in character, and in deed.

Modern Hurdles

There are a couple of ways modern thought has served to undermine our confidence in the Bible as the written revelation of God. One way has to do with the knowability of historical events; another with the final authority for truth.

First, the matter of history and knowledge. In the Enlightenment era, philosophers such as Ren Descartes taught that only those ideas that could be held without doubt could count as knowledge. This created a problem for Scripture, for its major doctrines were revealed through *historical events*, and the knowledge of history is open to doubt logically speaking. History is constantly changing. Because of such change, the different contexts of those living long ago and of the historian negatively affects the historian's ability to truly comprehend the past. At best, historical knowledge can only be probable. Religious ideas, on the other hand, seemed to be eternal; they are fixed and unchanging. It was believed that they could be known through reason better than through historical accounts. The classic statement of this position was made by the eighteenth century German, Gotthold Lessing, when he said, "The accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."{17} ("Accidental" means just the opposite of necessary; such things didn't logically have to happen as they did.)

Thus, biblical teachings were put on the side of probability, of opinion, rather than on the side of *knowledge*. Since it was thought that religious truths *ought* to be on the side of logical *certainty* and *knowledge*, people began to wonder whether the Bible could truly be the revelation of God.

The fact is, however, that we *can* know truth through historical texts; we find it there all the time. I *know* I was born in December of 1955 and that George Washington was our

first president – even though these truths aren't what we call logically *necessary*, such as with mathematical equations. Although historical knowledge as such doesn't give the rational certainty our Enlightenment forebears might have wanted, it doesn't have to in order to be counted as knowledge.{18} Knowledge doesn't *have* to be logically *necessary* in order to be *trustworthy*.{19} There is no reason God cannot make Himself known through the lives of people and nations, or that the historical records of that revelation cannot convey objective truth to subsequent generations.

Nonetheless, confidence in Scripture was weakened. Wherein shall our confidence lie, then, with respect to religious matters? If we can't know truth through historical accounts, but must rely on our own reason, our reason becomes supreme over Scripture. The authority for truth lies within us, not in the Bible.

This subjectivity is the second outgrowth of the Enlightenment that affects our understanding of revelation and the Bible. Now it is *I* who have final authority for what is true. For some people it is our *reason* that is supreme. The philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught that God speaks through our reason, and our worship of Him consists in our proper moral behavior. For others it is our *feelings* that are supreme. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, put the emphasis on our feelings of dependence and of oneness with God. For him, to make Scripture authoritative was to elevate reason above faith, and that was unacceptable. Thus, one camp elevated *reason* and said that historical accounts (such as those in Scripture) cannot provide the certainty we require, while the other camp elevated *feeling* and rejected final confidence in Scripture as too much in keeping with reason. Both ways the Bible lost out.

The turn inward was accentuated by the philosophy of existentialism. This philosophy had an influence on Christian theology. Theologian Rudolph Bultmann was "the outstanding exponent of the amalgamation of theology and existentialism,"

according to Philip Edgecumbe Hughes. The Bible was stripped of the supernatural, leaving little at all to go by with respect to the person of Jesus. But this didn't matter since Bultmann's existentialism turned the focus inward on our individual experience of the encounter with God.

The influence of this shift is still felt today. For too many of us, our confidence rests in our *own* understanding of things with little regard for establishing a theological foundation by which to measure our experience. On the one hand we get confused by disagreements over doctrines, and on the other our society is telling us to find truth within ourselves. How often do we find Christians making their bottom line in any disagreement over Christian teaching or activity, "I just feel this is true (or right)"? Now, it's true we can focus so much on the propositional, doctrinal content of Christianity that it becomes lifeless. It does indeed engage us on the level of personal experience. But as one scholar notes, "What is at stake is the actual *truth* of the biblical witness; not in the first place its truth *for me* . . . but its truth as coming *from God.* . . . The objective character of Scripture as truth given by God comes before and validates my subjective experience of its truth."{20} If we make our individual selves and our experiences normative for our faith, Christianity will have as many different faces as there are Christians! Our personal predilections and interests will become the substance of our faith. Any unity among us will be unity of *experience* rather than unity of the *faith.*

In response to the subjective turn of thinking, we hold that *reason* is insufficient as the source of knowledge of God. We could not know of such doctrines as the Incarnation and the Trinity unless God told us. Likewise, making *feelings* the final authority is death for theology, for there is no way to judge between personal experiences unless there is an objective authority. We have the needed authority in the revealed Word of God. Because we *can* know objective truth

about God, we needn’t look within ourselves to discover truth.

One final point. God has revealed Himself for a reason, that we might know Him and His desires and ways. We can have confidence that the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the writing of Scripture, has also been able to preserve it through the centuries so as to provide us with the same truth He provided those in ancient times.

God has spoken, through general revelation and special. We can know Him and His truth.

Notes

1. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 10-11.
2. Morris, 33.
3. Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 51.
4. Demarest, 242-243.
5. Warren Lewis, ed., *Global Congress of World Religions* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Unification Theological Seminary, 1978), 126.
6. Bolaji Idowe, *African Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1975), 151. Quoted in Demarest, 243.
7. Demarest, 243.
8. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. “Revelation, Special,” by Carl F. H. Henry.
9. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 113.
10. J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 87.
11. Packer, 52-53.
12. Packer, 86.
13. Other modes of special revelation which can be categorized as the word spoken were dreams, visions, and theophanies. Cf.

Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 44-48.
14. Packer, 81.
15. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 287. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, Special Revelation and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 111.
16. Ramm, 113.
17. Philip E. Hughes, "The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity," in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 178.
18. See my article "Confident Belief: What Does It Mean To Know Truth?", Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Web at www.probe.org/confident-belief/.
19. See the above article.
20. Hughes, 183.

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"What Does the Bible Say About Tithing?"

I enjoyed reading your article on the will of God and I agree with your point of view. I was wondering if in your opinion the Bible is clear about what we should do about Tithing?

I do not believe we are under the tithe obligation (10%) anymore. But this doesn't mean we aren't obligated to give. In fact, it might be that we should give *more!* I believe our responsibility is greater under the New Testament because now we don't have a simple figure (or percentage) given that we can follow, but rather must consider what the needs are around

us and give accordingly. The model in giving, of course, was God the Father in giving His Son for us, and who continues to give to us bountifully. Jesus was pleased with the old woman who gave only a little bit because it was all she had: giving was the important thing to her, taking care of the work of God rather than worrying about her own needs (Mk. 12:41ff). He also taught us not to fret about our personal needs but to lay up treasure in heaven (Mt. 6:19-21, 31-34). If we do what we are convinced is right, even if it costs us dearly, our Father in heaven will reward us in due time (Lk.6:38). Paul called on us to be cheerful givers, to look out for others ahead of ourselves. If all of us have that attitude, then we will find ourselves helping others and being helped in return (2 Cor. 3:13-15). He taught us to give bountifully (2 Cor. 9:6), but he taught us to give as we have purposed in our hearts, not under compulsion. And he promised God's provision for us (vv. 8-11).

A key issue in the matter of giving is fear. Do we see a need and not give out of fear? Do we out of insecurity or greed hold onto our material things or horde our wealth to obtain more so we can buy more things or be secure if the economy takes a slide?

Another key matter is the ongoing ministries of the church. Are we behind our church leaders? Do we support them with our time, energies, gifts, and money? What about the work of Christ around the world? Are we giving so others can go and proclaim the Gospel?

We need to get away from the law mindset on this matter. Our minds and hearts should be focused on our church and the world around us, and we should be ready to give to help others and further the kingdom, even if we do without. We must have an eternal perspective; this world and its "goodies" are not what are important. The work of the kingdom of Christ should provide the focus and measure for everything we do and have.

I cannot tell you how much you should give. If your greatest desire is to further the kingdom of Christ, and everything you have is at His disposal, then the balance will be tipped toward giving. Imagine what the church could do if we all had the attitude of the Israelites when it came time to build the tabernacle! (Ex. 35:5ff)

Rick Wade
Probe Ministries

See Also:

- Probe Answers Our E-Mail: "What's the NT Understanding of Tithing?"
- Probe Answers Our E-Mail: "Where Should We Give Our Tithe?"

"Why I Don't Believe in God"

Dear Christian Philosopher,

One day I was asked why I believed in God. I had a very hard time coming up with one reason. However, since my faith has disappeared, I have had a relatively easy time coming up with reasons that I do not believe in Him. Here are five:

- **I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don't believe that He exists).**

- **I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not**

believe in God.

• I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.

• It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical substance, then how?)

• There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes mind or the other realm); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kinds faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.

Like I said, my faith disappeared. I believe that if someone shows me how I have made a mistake, then my faith will come back. I know that these reasons are probably not great in the eyes of a seasoned philosopher (I am just doing my undergraduate work right now), but in my stage of development as a thinker, these are huge roadblocks. Thank you.

Dear _____,

Thanks for your letter. I will respond to each of your five points individually.

> *1. I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don't believe that He exists).*

By perceive, do you mean through the senses? If so, for this reason to be valid you must present a case for a strong empiricism such as that of the logical positivists of the early 20th century. They believed that only that can be held as true knowledge which is empirically verifiable. This has been shown to be self-referentially incoherent, since the theory itself can't be so verified. Consider, too, the things I'm sure you believe exist even though you haven't perceived them by your senses, things such as electricity or love. You can see the effects of these things, but not the things themselves (if love can be called a "thing"). Similarly, we can see the effects or the works of God without seeing Him. If you mean you haven't perceived God in any way, there is nothing I can say to that, except that this is no proof that God doesn't exist. It could be that you have closed off any avenues by which you might perceive Him.

> *2. I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not believe in God.*

Again, by perceive do you mean by the senses? If so, my first response still stands. If you mean any kind of perception, then millions of people can offer positive testimony. Of course, if you have decided already that God doesn't exist, then you will write such testimonies off to something else.

But that would be no argument against God's existence, but rather a testimony of your own philosophical/religious biases.

> *3. I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.*

Here you first need to present an argument to prove that anything which exists must take up space. Materialists have the same obligation as theists to prove their world view.

Here are some reasons I find naturalism untenable. Consider first that if matter is all that exists (since all existing things must take up space), then the universe must be explainable purely in terms of natural laws, including the law of cause and effect. If there is a purely materialistic cause/effect explanation for everything, then even our mental processes are nothing more than the motion of atoms in our brains (whether chemical or electrical) acting in a strict cause/effect sequence. But if this is the case, how can we know whether what we think is true, or whether it is just the result of determined natural processes? How do you know that what you think about the world outside yourself actually obtains? It could all be simply mental images your brain has produced. There must be something in our reasoning abilities which isn't reducible to natural processes.

In addition, such determinism strikes at the heart of free will, which means that you didn't make a free choice to write your letter: it simply happened as a result of the natural, non-mental, processes of your brain and body.

One more note: Those working in artificial intelligence still haven't been able to produce a computer which thinks like a human. If reason were a strictly causal process surely they would have been able to do so already.

> *4. It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with*

> *physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical substance, then how?)*

Why do you believe it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance? Some say that such interaction would negate natural laws. But I see no reason to accept this. We can't deny the interaction of the supernatural with the natural just because it complicates matters.

Just how this happens I cannot say. But my limited understanding shouldn't be an impediment to belief. If we have good reasons to believe God exists and created the universe, and there are no objections significant enough to overcome those reasons, then one is justified in believing in God. Because there are other reasons to believe in God, the burden is on you to prove the spiritual cannot interact with the physical.

> *5. There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes' mind or 'the other realm'); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kind's faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.*

You (again) make your presuppositions very clear: 1) all existing things take up space, and 2) the spiritual cannot interact with the material. Again, I ask that you present a case for your materialism and for your assumption about the impossibility of spiritual/natural interaction.

Here I have simply tried to respond to your ideas and show where I see weaknesses. For positive arguments to believe, there are numerous resources available. I suggest that you look for copies of C.S Lewis' books *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*. For a study on mind/body dualism from a Christian perspective, see J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), chapter 3. Also look through the list of articles on our web site (www.probe.org) under the categories Theology/Apologetics and World View/Philosophy. My articles on atheism and miracles address the issue of naturalism.

Rick Wade

Probe Ministries

"How Do I Answer This Atheist's Argument?"

I'm a young Christian doing some study at _____ University. I am currently engaged in a debate with an atheist who reckons his argument is indestructible. I have tried to critique it but he reckons that my logic is false.

This is his proof for the non-existence of god:

> ***First, in order to discuss the existence of god, we must define god. So I say god must be conscious. That way we can***

distinguish god from any random forces that might be out there just spitting out universes. But I'm conscious and I'm not god so we must further define god so that god can be distinguished from a highly advanced alien race. So god must be the First Cause. There we have it, god must be conscious and the first cause or god doesn't exist. If god isn't conscious OR if god isn't the first cause THEN god doesn't exist. Let's examine what it means to be conscious or to have awareness. When one is aware of something and that something moves or changes then one is aware of that movement or change. The change causes a change within the one who is aware of it. Example: When a leaf blows across the road the position of that leaf in my mind changes. My mind changes from knowing where the leaf was to knowing where the leaf is. To be Conscious is to be Changeable. So we can say, If god isn't CHANGEABLE or if god isn't the first cause then god doesn't exist. Now, let's examine what it means to be the first cause. The first cause must be uncaused for there can be no cause preceding the first cause. Now since no change can occur without cause (unless of course you believe that things like the universe can just pop into existence without cause) God must not be able to change. To be the First Cause is to be unchangeable. So we can say, If god isn't CHANGEABLE or if god isn't UNCHANGEABLE then god doesn't exist. Logically nothing can be changeable and unchangeable. SO GOD DOESN'T EXIST. There are only 5 logical objections to My Proof.

• God Being Consciousness
• God Being The First Cause
• Consciousness Requiring Change
• The First Cause Requiring Unchangeableness
• Something Not Being Able To Be Both Changeable and Also Totally Unchangeable.

Choose Your Poison. Yes, If anyone can debunk my proof I shall withdraw it and stop using it. Furthermore I shall

> ***move into the ranks of the Agnostics. Our point of contention is that you insist that The Cause must be conscious which requires change when we both know that in order for the first cause to exist it must be totally unchangeable. Now, if you or anyone else would care to explain how something can be both changeable and totally unchangeable, I'd be glad to hear it. Until then you're flying on a wing and a prayer, which means you're falling. The changeable vs. unchangeable paradox is the basis of my whole proof. The basic premise is that a thing can't both have a property and not have the same property. i.e. A line can't be totally straight and partially non-straight or curved. As it turns out the definition of God which is used by most people and mainstream religions requires god to be changeable and totally unchangeable, thus creating a paradox. If I were to believe in 'god' I could still never be a Christian. Here's a good exercise that will help you choose a religion. Try to work out in your own mind what god must be like. But don't just say god must be all good try to prove each characteristic of your god.***

This is what he is saying, and quite frankly, I don't have an answer. Any help would be much appreciated.

Thanks so much for your time.

I think there are two problems here, one building upon the other. The basic problem is the atheist's understanding of God as first principle. This is an understanding bequeathed to us by Greek philosophy. Plato didn't have a God as in Judaism and Christianity. He believed in the One (or the Good) and the Demiurge. The former was remote, untouched by changing things. The latter formed what was there into the universe. While Christian thinkers sought to pull those two ideas together, an emphasis on God as unchanging remained, even to the extent of denying His passibility; that is, that He could be emotionally affected by anything outside Himself. While I disagree with open theists regarding God's knowledge of the entire future, I

can agree with them that Christian theology (thanks in part to Aquinas) has let Greek philosophy shape its ideas more than it should. Although I believe God is unchanging in His nature and purposes, this doesn't mean there can't be any change of any kind in Him. We must let Scripture tell us what God is like (albeit aided sometimes by philosophical concepts); the atheist is attacking a straw man in his attempt to disprove God.

The second problem is this. Even if we concede that gaining new knowledge does entail change (and this change cannot be allowed in God), if God knows everything – past, present and future – then there is no new knowledge for him. Therefore, there is no change.

Hope this helps.

Rick Wade
Probe Ministries

The Will of God

Christians often suffer anxiety over knowing the will of God. Should we? Maybe we have a wrong understanding of what it is or how to know it.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

"Evangelicals differ from most Roman Catholics and liberals in that they are constantly uptight about guidance," says J.I. Packer. "No other concern commands more interest or arouses more anxiety among them nowadays than discovering the will of God."{1}

I know what he means. How many times have I fretted over *what* I was supposed to do? And *when*? And *how*? A number of readers are probably nodding in agreement right now. The desire to do what God wills for us slips almost unnoticed from a simple desire to please into a fretful anxiety. We're confronted with a decision that must be made, and when no solution comes readily to mind, we look to God to tell us what to do. When no answer is immediately forthcoming, we begin to panic. Or maybe we've been taught that our hearts are "desperately wicked," so any idea or desire *we* have just has to be opposed to what God wants. So we throw that possibility out and look for the answer that must be right because it's just what we *wouldn't* want to do!

Packer's experience is that "the more earnest and sensitive a believer is, the more likely he or she is to be hung up about guidance."{2} We want to do what is right, but we aren't sure *what* we're to do or *how* we're to do it. And we fear the consequences if we get it wrong.

Why do we worry so much about finding God's will? Could it be we have a distorted idea of what it is or of how to find it?

An idea about God's will found frequently in the church is that God has a plan prepared for each individual life and it is our duty to discover what it contains and follow it. If we fail to do just the right thing, we will probably have to settle for second best or worse. And a number of us seem to have a really hard time finding out what it is. Garry Friesen calls this the "traditional view,"{3} but Packer points out that this "traditional view" goes back no further than about 150 years.{4}

What's going on? Does God have us on a great big scavenger hunt, poking about here and there, trying to find His elusive will before time runs out? Bruce Waltke likens this view to "a version of the old con man's ruse, the three-shell game,"{5} where a rock is put under one of three shells that are slid

around the table in a confusing fashion to make you lose track of where it is. Is God playing games with us? Or is He telling us but we're hard of hearing?

Packer notes that this view can leave Christians feeling second-rate. "You may not be on the scrapheap, but you are on the shelf," he says. He also says that this perspective leads to fear, causing some to avoid making decisions for fear of messing up, or others to live their lives with heavy hearts, believing they've already messed up and are stuck with less than God's best. Of course, God must then be rather upset with us.

Besides this, Waltke believes this view can result in immaturity since it isn't really up to us to *choose,* but rather to simply pick the shell under which is the rock.

Does it make sense that God would make finding His will so hard? That can't be right. Maybe we have a wrong understanding about what it means to know God's will or even what God's will *is.*

The Will of God in Scripture

In the Bible, the "will of God" refers to a few things. It can mean the eternal, sovereign plan of God, which will be accomplished *regardless* of any conscious acceptance and participation on our part. (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:9-11) We cannot undo the sovereign will of God. The phrase can also be used "to describe God's desire or consent – what He wants and what is favorable to Him," as Waltke puts it.{6} This includes God's laws or specific instructions that we can choose to obey or disobey, or a desire of His for a specific situation as when Moses had to settle disputes between the people of Israel. (Ex. 8:15,16)

More often than not, the "will of God" in Scripture refers to God's moral laws or commands dealing with the stuff of

everyday life. In the Old Testament we read, “Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law, And keep it with all my heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it” (Ps. 119: 34,35), and “I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart.”(Ps. 40:8) In addition to these general laws, however, occasionally, prophets gave instructions regarding specific matters.

In the New Testament we find Paul giving the Ephesians general instructions for not living as the world does. He writes, “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” (Eph. 5:17) Instructing the Thessalonians about sexual purity he writes, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” (1 Th. 4:3) Waltke sums up several passages when he says that “God’s will is that you be holy, wise, mature, joyful, prayerful, and submissive.”{7}

Does He have a specific plan for each of us? Surely He does, for how could He work the whole of history toward His desired end if the individual parts were left indefinite? Paul introduced himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” (Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1) The question is: Is God going to tell us what to do in each specific situation? And, is it true that there’s only one right choice?

Foundations of Decision Making

Typically when we find ourselves concerned about the will of God, it’s in the context of decision making. There are several elements in the decision making process. Before looking at some of them, however, I need to establish a few foundations.

First, we need to reintegrate the concept of knowing and living in God’s will into the whole fabric of our lives. It is a matter of importance for all our lives, not just for decision making. Understanding this casts a new light on what is meant by the “will of God.”{8}

Second, against the "traditional" view of decision making, I believe that there *isn't* necessarily only one right choice with respect to nonmoral decisions. We give the different elements of decision making their due place in our consideration, make the best choice we know how, and trust God to accomplish His will. Unless there is undoubtable direction by God to go a specific way, we have the freedom and the responsibility to choose.{9}

Third, there is a change in how people seek guidance from the era of the Old Covenant to that of the New. In Old Testament times, people used various ways of divining God's will, including casting lots, using the Urim and Thummim, and interpreting dreams. However, things changed after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke points out that "after Pentecost there is no instance of the church seeking God's will through any of the forms of divination" seen in the Old Testament. "The New Testament gives no explicit command to 'find God's will,' nor can you find any particular instructions on how to go about finding God's will."{10} He later adds, "God does not administer His church in the same way He administered old Israel."{11} In Acts 1:24 we read of the apostles casting lots to know God's will about choosing another apostle to take Judas' place, but after this, "there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God's will" recorded.{12}

Fourth, good decision making comes through having a close relationship with God, which is fostered in a variety of ways.{13} It is the very things that we do or should do *routinely* that assist us in making decisions, things such as learning the Bible, praying, being in close fellowship with other believers, etc. We do the kinds of things that work together to conform us into His image, and these very things feed our ability to make wise decisions along the way.

Fifth and last, the elements of decision making don't form some kind of neat, orderly system in which particular steps

are taken in a necessary order, one following the other, so that when we reach the end the decision pops out.{14} Each element is weighed along with the others with some having more weight than others. For example, both my desires and the Bible are elements of decision making. But the Bible carries more weight. Sometimes one of the elements might incline us to say "no," but consideration of another, more weighty one will change that to a "yes." This is a part of wise thinking: understanding the weight of each factor using God's understanding as the standard.

So how do we go about seeking guidance for making decisions? Let's look at a few elements of decision making.

Elements of Decision Making

The Bible

Romans 12:2 says we are able to "test and approve what God's will is" as our minds are renewed. And this renewal comes through a knowledge of His Word illuminated by His Spirit.

As God's Word is our final authority for faith, it is our final authority for practice as well. It is our most authoritative source for knowing God and His will. Solomon said we would know how to live as we follow God's commands: "When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you." (Prov. 6:22) Waltke notes what Paul says about the purpose of Scripture: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. It is there that we learn about God and His work, find rebuke and correction when we stray, and discover what makes for righteous living. This includes the decision making part of life.

Because of the clarity of Scripture on many things, we have an immediate answer for a lot of the decisions we have to make. For example, a man doesn't need to ask if it's God's will for

him to fool around with his neighbor's wife! The Bible is clear on that.

In addition to telling us what *not* to do, the Bible also has a lot to say about what we *should* do. We learn about the love of God and what that means for relating and reaching out to other people. We learn about the value of the created realm, of work, of personal gifting, of money. We learn about the overall project of God (redemption), and we see how *we* can model a redemptive love in our world today.

The desires of our heart

Another source for obtaining guidance is the desires of our heart.{15} Are you surprised? Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." Delighting in Him involves wanting what He wants, molding our desires to His. This comes through walking closely with Him.

God gives us talents and abilities for a reason! If these things are honorable and useful for God's kingdom, they aren't to be rejected simply out of fear that God might not like us to do something we enjoy! As one man put it, we can "love God and do what we please" when we walk close to Him, because we know Him and the kinds of things He desires.

Prayer and meditation

Walking closely with God can only happen through constant prayer. This is another significant element of decision making. Through prayer, we force ourselves to stay attuned to God. Our prayer is fed by a knowledge of and meditation upon His Word. Sometimes wise decisions become clear when distractions are put away and our minds are allowed to focus and do their work uninterrupted. We pray about particular

issues, but we also pray for understanding in general. Paul prayed that the Colossians would learn God's will "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." (Col. 1:9) To all who ask believing, as James says, such wisdom will be given "generously and without reproach." (1:5)

One very important element of knowing God's mind and will is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. His presence within us is one of the major differences between us and Old Testament saints. This, I think, is significant with respect to knowing God's will.

One way the Spirit helps us in knowing God's will is what we call illumination, the means by which He helps us understand the deeper significance of Scripture. Another way is through bringing things to our attention. J. I. Packer speaks of "nudges" of the Spirit, or a "focusing of concern." (See Acts 17:16) "When we say we have a 'vision' or 'burden' about something," he says, "we are referring to an impression. When our concern is biblically proper, we are right to regard our impression as a nudge from the Holy Spirit."{16}

Sometimes Christians say the Lord has "told" them to do something. While we cannot – and do not wish to – define the limits of how God can guide us, we can learn from Scripture what we might expect. Those who say God gives special revelations of His will sometimes refer to instances such as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, or Peter's on Simon the Tanner's roof where he learned that a change in dietary laws was being made. But notice that such special revelations came without being asked for; they didn't come in response to a desire to know God's will. Bruce Waltke notes that, "There is no place in the New Testament where we are taught to seek a special revelation" from God.{17} Paul spends a good amount of time teaching the church how to do the will of God. One might expect at least *some* attention given to seeking God's will through a direct word of the Spirit to individuals if that's how God typically works. But it isn't there. Again, the

question isn't whether God *can* speak this way, for surely He can. We're speaking here of the norm, of what we can expect from God in the normal course of life.

What should we do if we believe the Spirit is speaking directly to us? Packer believes (and I agree) "that impressions must be rigorously tested by biblical wisdom—the corporate wisdom of the believing community as well as personal wisdom. If this is not done," he continues, "impressions that are rooted in egoism, pride, headstrong unrealism, the fancy that irrationality glorifies God, a sense that some human being is infallible, or similar misconceptions will be allowed to masquerade as Spirit-given."{18}

The church

Speaking of corporate wisdom, the counsel of others is an important element in making decisions. "Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory," we read in Proverbs 11:14. Such counsel is to be found primarily in the church, for it is the church that is responsible to do the will of God on earth. Sometimes we can find good counsel on some matters from non-Christians. But when we're thinking of the major decisions of life we look to the church where we should be able to find those who share our Christian beliefs, who have the mind of Christ, and who are mature in godly wisdom. "Personal guidance," says Packer, "that we believe we have received by inner nudge from the Lord needs to be checked with believers who are capable of recognizing unrealism, delusion, and folly when they see it."{19}

Not only can we find guidance for dealing with ideas we have, but also the church is a channel for the Spirit calling us to do something new. Through the church, the Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. (Acts 13:2,3){20} In the

fellowship of believers we have a place to discover the abilities we have and to put them to use, and to be drawn into places we never thought we could go.

Providence

The providence of God is another element of the decision making process. This is God's direct dealing in His world in general and in our lives in particular – His sovereign governance of the world.{21} By God's providence the stars stay in their orbits and the rain waters the earth. By His *special* providence "God's hand is 'visible' in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way."{22}

Often, things seem to just happen in our lives by chance. More often than not it is in hindsight that we see the Lord at work. By "chance" you meet someone who turns out to be a valuable resource for some project you're working on. Without thinking anything about it you say something encouraging to someone who was that very day going to quit her job out of a sense of hopelessness, and she reconsiders. Just a week or so ago a pastor told me about a certain speaker that he was going to have come to his church next year. I told him about some things that the man had written that he might not know about, which could prove the speaker a poor choice. After I told him, he said our conversation was providential. He researched the matter himself and agreed with me.

A note of caution must be sounded here. It is possible to misinterpret the events of our lives, leading us to think God is doing one thing when it is really something else He's up to. As with the other elements of decision making, our interpretations need to be considered in light of the other elements.

Because God's sovereign plan *will* be done, it isn't up to us

to consciously bring it about. However, by being aware of how God is at work, we have clues about how to make decisions. We also grow in our faith as we see plans fall together that we have presented to Him, and we learn to relax in His control in our lives.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a major element of decision making that operates throughout the whole process. Garry Friesen calls his understanding of biblical decision making "the way of wisdom." Paul wrote, "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise." (Eph. 5:15)

Wisdom is fundamentally a character trait. One writer notes that "the major thrust of wisdom in the Old Testament was a code of moral conduct . . . a way of thinking and conduct that is orderly, socially sensitive, and morally upright."{23} This theme is continued in the New Testament, for example, in Paul's prayer that we gain "spiritual wisdom and understanding," so we "may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work." (Col. 1:9,10) We might define wisdom as "a right ordering of life in keeping with the nature and will of God."

James tells us if we ask for wisdom believing, we will receive it. (1:5-8) But note that "wisdom" isn't the same as "wise answer." We won't have to grow in wisdom if God tells us everything to do. We would always like children need to be led. If we understand the character of God and walk closely with Him, learning to think with the mind of Christ, we will grow in our ability to make wise choices.

Faith

Finally, we come to faith, an element that is essential in all areas of the Christian life. All things the Christian does are to be done in faith. Paul says that whatever isn't of faith is sin. (Rom. 14:23) Recall that James said we must ask for wisdom *in faith* (1:6). Faith allows us to rest, to not be anxious, to believe God cares and is in control.

We learn and live the Christian life, walking near to God, growing in wisdom. In times of decision, wisdom chooses the best course while faith rests on God's promises to guide us and be with us. We decide a course of action, and faith carries us through.

Summary

To sum up, then, knowing God's will means fundamentally knowing Him and what pleases Him. Although on occasion there could be an unusually clear leading of God, for the most part we make decisions based on the input we gain through the normal course of discipleship, pulled together in spiritual wisdom, trusting God to accomplish His will, and resting in that confidence.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, "Guidance: How God Leads Us" in *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale Publishers, 1987), 105.
2. Packer, 106.
3. Friesen rejects this view. See his *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980).
4. Packer, 110, 116.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 7. "Most ancient texts still extant [nearly 80%] deal with divining the mind of God," 26.
7. Waltke, 71.
8. As an aid to this, Waltke suggest we talk about the

guidance of God rather than the will of God when making decisions. Cf. Waltke, 169.
9. Cf. Friesen, 179.
10. Waltke, 12.
11. Waltke, 54-55.
12. Waltke, 53. The word translated “show us” isn’t used again in the New Testament after Pentecost. It is only used elsewhere in Luke 10:1 referring to when Jesus appointed or “showed” the seventy disciples whom He sent out.
13. Waltke, 16.
14. Waltke believes there is an important order to the steps (see Waltke, p. 59), but I disagree. I do see a certain order of priority with respect to the weight of particular elements, however.
15. Waltke, 86.
16. Packer, 128.
17. Waltke, 19.
18. Packer, 129.
19. Packer, 122.
20. Cf. Waltke, 109.
21. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), s.v. “Providence,” by Walter Elwell.
22. Rick Wade, “Miracles.” Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Internet at www.probe.org/miracles/.
23. Elwell, s.v. “Wisdom,” by C. Hassell Bullock.

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Eastern Orthodoxy

Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

In a previous article I spoke of the conversation now going on between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics prompted by the culture war. A third tradition is participating in such talks as well, namely, the Eastern Orthodox Church. For many if not most of us, Eastern Orthodoxy is a real mystery. Images of bearded priests and candles, and the sounds of chanting come to mind. They are so far removed from us, it seems. Are we really part of the same church? Such a question would be absolutely preposterous to them, of course, for Orthodox are fond of pointing out that they stand closer to the ancient church than do Catholics or Protestants.

In this article I'd like to introduce you to the Eastern Orthodox Church. I will simply present some of Orthodoxy's history and beliefs as an introduction without offering any critique.{1}

History

Orthodox Christians trace their lineage back to the apostolic church. The apostles, of course, founded only one church. Since the founding of the church there have been three significant divisions. The first occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries when what are known as the Oriental Orthodox churches split off over theological issues. These include the churches in Iran and Iraq, sometimes called the "Nestorian" or "Chaldean" churches. Also included were the Syrian Church of Antioch and the Coptic Church of Egypt. The churches that were left comprise what we know of as the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are the churches that remain in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.{2}

The next division, typically dated in the eleventh century, was between the Eastern Church and the Western or Roman Catholic Church. Rome was one of the five main centers, or *sees*, of the Church. Although it was the most important of the

five, it was different from the others. For example, the Western Church based in Rome used Latin, whereas the Eastern Church used the languages of the people. Rome had more of a legal mindset in its theology, whereas the East was more mystical. In addition, various cultural and political issues set it apart. The barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in the West further separated the West from the East.

Such things as these set the stage for division. Two major issues brought it to a head. One was the power of the pope in Rome. The bishops of the Church had long been seen as generally equal; all the bishops had a vote in decisions affecting the whole Church. However, a few wielded more influence than others. The Roman See was at the top. Thus, the pope was considered the first among equals among the bishops of the Orthodox world. However, some of the popes came to desire universal supremacy. For example, Pope Nicholas wrote in 865 that he had authority "over all the earth, that is, over *every* Church."{3}

The other theological problem was that of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father. Does He proceed from the Father only or both the Father and the Son? The Nicene Creed originally said that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father." A clause was added later by the Church in the West, without the agreement of the other bishops, to make it read, "proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*." Later I'll look at this a little more closely. For now we should note the importance of the clause for the unity of the Church.

The clause seems to have originated in Spain and was accepted by Charlemagne as part of the Creed. The seriousness of the matter can be seen in the antagonism it produced between East and West. For example, when the Greeks wouldn't include the phrase, writers in Charlemagne's court began accusing them of heresy. For another, in 867, Pope Nicholas' backing of the inclusion of the *Filioque* clause in opposition to the rest of

the Church brought about his excommunication by Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, although communion was later restored.

The East resented its inclusion for two reasons. First, this act revealed the extent of power the Pope was trying to claim in allowing the addition on his own authority. Second, it was thought to be incorrect theologically. (I will return to these later.)

In the eleventh century relations between the East and the West worsened severely. Rome gained new power politically in the West, reviving the belief that it had universal jurisdiction. The Normans gained power in Italy and forced the Greeks there to conform to Latin methods of worship. In retaliation, the patriarch of Constantinople forced the Latin churches there to adopt Greek practices. After a few more events further heightened tensions, on July 16, 1054 some legates of the pope laid a Bull of Excommunication on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. This is the date commonly given for the great schism between the East and the West. It was a landmark occasion, but the end didn't finally come in fact until the early thirteenth century following a few tragic events in the Crusades. Now there was the Roman Church and the Eastern Church, the one headed by the pope, the other headed by the patriarch of Constantinople.

The Godhead

Space does not permit a full description of the theology of the Orthodox Church. Let's touch briefly on its doctrine of God.

The Trinity

The Holy Trinity is of supreme importance in Orthodox theology and life. It "is not a piece of 'high theology' reserved for

the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian." Because we're made in the image of God, we can't understand ourselves if we don't understand this doctrine. God's triune nature also makes clear that He is personal—that He experiences personal communion within the Godhead, and thus can commune with us as well.

The Father

Below I'll speak further about the role of the Father in the Trinity. Here I'll just touch on the Orthodox understanding of the knowability of God. Orthodox believe that God is unknowable to us in His essence for He is so much higher than we are: He is absolutely transcendent. For that reason we can only employ negative language when speaking of Him: we can say what He is *not* in His being, but not what He *is.*

However, God is not cut off from His creation. While God's *essence* is the core of His being and cannot be known, His *energies*, which permeate creation, enable us to experience Him. His energies "are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind."{4}

The Incarnate Son

The whole of the sacramental theology of Orthodoxy is grounded in the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation is so significant that Orthodox believe it would have occurred even if Adam and Eve hadn't fallen into sin. It was an act of love—God sending His Son to commune with us. Because of sin, however, it also became an act of salvation.

Orthodoxy seeks to give proper weight to both Christ's deity and His humanity. One must recall the weight given to the

Nicene Creed and its clear declaration of both natures. He is "true God and true man, one person in two natures, without separation and without confusion: a single person, but endowed with two wills and two energies." The divinity of Christ is of utmost importance to Orthodox. "'Behind the veil of Christ's flesh, Christians behold the Triune God' . . . perhaps the most striking feature in the Orthodox approach to the Incarnate Christ [is] an overwhelming sense of His *divine glory.*"{5} He is the face of God for us. This revelation was seen most strikingly in the Transfiguration and the Resurrection.{6} On the other hand, the places where He lived and ministered and the Cross upon which He died are pointers to His humanity, and they are revered highly.

The Holy Spirit

The importance of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church can hardly be overstated. They believe, in fact, that it is one thing that sets the Eastern Church apart from the Western. Whereas the Western Church put greater emphasis on the power of theological understanding, Orthodox depend more on the activity of the Spirit. St. Seraphim of Sarov said that such things as prayer and fasting and other Christian practices are not the aim of the Christian life. "The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God."{7} In the corporate setting, the Spirit is invoked repeatedly in Church worship. On the individual level, believers place themselves under His protection each morning in their prayers.

Earlier I talked about the split in the Church in the eleventh century. One of the key issues was the clause the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed, which said that the Spirit was sent by the Father *and by the Son*. This was called the *Filioque* clause. The Eastern Church rejected this addition because it was inserted without the support of the universal

Church and because it was seen as incorrect theologically. For Orthodox theologians, the clause confused the roles of the Father and the Son in the economy of the Trinity. "The distinctive characteristic of the first person of the Trinity is Fatherhood," says Timothy Ware. "He is the source in the Trinity. The distinctive character of the second person is Sonship; . . . [He] has His source and origin in the Father, . . . The distinctive character of the third person is Procession: like the Son, He has His source and origin in the Father; but His relationship to the Father is different from that of the Son, since He is not begotten but from all eternity He *proceeds* from the Father."{8} To the Orthodox, then, to say the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the *Son* is to give those two persons the same function. They point out, too, the scriptural teaching that "the Spirit of truth . . . proceeds from the Father." (Jn. 15:26)

Furthermore, the clause seemed to imply a subordination of the Spirit to the Son, which could result in a diminution of the Spirit in the Church. But the ministry of the Spirit and the Son are "complementary and reciprocal." "From one point of view," says Ware, "the whole 'aim' of the Incarnation is the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost."{9}

The Church in Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that true belief and worship are maintained by the Orthodox Church. "Orthodoxy claims to be universal—not something exotic and oriental, but simply Christianity," says Orthodox bishop Timothy Ware.{10} They believe that Orthodoxy has maintained the teachings of the apostles and the early Church faithfully through the centuries.

Three Defining Characteristics

Something one notices soon after beginning an investigation of the Orthodox Church is its attempt to let its theology inform its practice in life and in worship.

The Orthodox Church can be described generally under three headings: Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological. Regarding the *Trinity*, beyond simply holding it as a correct understanding of God, the Church attempts to emulate the Trinity in its practices. As the Trinity is both one and many, the Church is thought of as both one and many—unity in diversity. This applies to both individuals and to local churches all taken together. Orthodoxy is made up of a number of independent *autocephalous* churches, as they are called. "Just as in the Trinity the three persons are equal," says Ware, "so in the Church no one bishop can claim to wield absolute power over all the rest; yet, just as in the Trinity the Father enjoys pre-eminence as source and fountainhead of the deity, so within the Church the Pope is 'first among equals'."{11}

Further, the Orthodox Church is *Christological.* It sees itself as "the extension of the Incarnation, the place where the Incarnation perpetuates itself." It is "the centre and organ of Christ's redeeming work . . . it is nothing else than the continuation and extension of His prophetic, priestly, and kingly power . . . The Church is Christ with us."{12}

Finally, the Church is *Pneumatological*. It is the dwelling place of the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of power in the Church. In addition, He both unites the Church and ensures our diversity. We are separately given the Spirit, but so that we might come together. "Life in the Church does not mean the ironing out of human variety, nor the imposition of a rigid and uniform pattern upon all alike, but the exact opposite. The saints, so far from displaying a drab monotony, have developed the most vivid and distinctive personalities."{13}

Authority in the Church

The Orthodox Church is at once popular and hierarchical. It is popular in the sense that the focus is on the people, and authority resides in the Church, which is the people of God. However, the Church is represented in its leadership, and here one finds a strong hierarchy. Major decisions are made by the bishops with a special place of honor going to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. "Where Rome thinks in terms of the supremacy and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope," says Ware, "Orthodoxy thinks in terms of the five Patriarchs and of the Ecumenical Councils."{14}

While the decisions of bishops are binding in general, it is understood that they aren't infallible. The Church is infallible, but its bishops aren't. As Paul said, the *church* is "the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15)

For the Orthodox, the Church is the bearer and guardian of truth, which is passed on through *Tradition*. Included in Church Tradition are the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the early centuries, and the writings of the Fathers, the Canons or laws, the Icons—"in fact," says Timothy Ware, "the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages."{15} The Bible forms a *part* of this Tradition; it is seen as a product *of* the Church and derives its authority *from* the Church. "Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils."{16} As another writer says, "It is neither subordinate nor superior to tradition, not can there be any contradictions between them."{17}

When challenges were made to what had been taught by the Church from the beginning, answers were provided by various councils through the early centuries. The most important was the Council of Nicaea. Thus the Nicene Creed has preeminence,

although the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creeds are also used. At these councils important doctrines of the faith were hammered out. Nicaea, for example, dealt with the person of Christ. Was He God or man or both? If both, how did the two natures relate in one person? The determinations of the councils, which were universally accepted, became authoritative for the Church.

The Church Fathers also provided authoritative teaching about Christian doctrine. Sometimes, however, they were in error. It became necessary, then, for the church to distinguish "patristic wheat . . . from patristic chaff."{18}

The Worship of the Church

A close look at the Orthodox Church reveals quickly the importance of the Church as a whole, as the functioning body of Christ. The priority of the Church in Orthodoxy—not the so-called "invisible" or universal Church, but the visible worshipping community—might seem a bit odd to evangelicals. In evangelicalism the emphasis is more upon the individual's relationship to Christ, whereas in Orthodoxy, the Christian life revolves around the Church as the locus of the ministry of Christ and the Spirit.

The Church is thought of as a reflection of heaven on earth. This belief underlies the elaborate nature of the worship experience. This reflection is seen first of all through *beauty*. A peculiar gift of the Orthodox, it is said, "is this power of perceiving the beauty of the spiritual world, and expressing that celestial beauty in their worship."{19}

The worship service has supreme importance in Orthodoxy; it is more important than doctrine and the disciplines of the Christian life. "Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-

fulfillment in worship." The liturgy is the contents of the worship service including the readings, actions, music, and all else involved. Says Timothy Ware: "Into the Holy Liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience." It is what inspires "their best poetry, art, and music."{20} Further, the liturgy of worship attempts to embrace both worlds—heaven and earth. There is "one altar, one sacrifice, one presence" in both. It is in the Church that God dwells among humans.

Orthodoxy is thoroughly sacramental. Holding that God has graced the physical world through the Incarnation of Christ, Orthodox see the whole of the created order as somehow graced by God and usable for revealing Himself. For the life of the Church there are special sacraments that are channels of God's grace. Through particular physical means, such as through the elements of Communion or the water of Baptism, God extends His grace in a special way. The sacraments are "effectual signs of grace, ritual acts which both express and bring about a spiritual reality. Just as in the Incarnation the eternal Word of God was united with human nature in Jesus Christ, so in the sacraments spiritual gifts are communicated through tangible realities."{21}

The Liturgy of worship reaches its highest point in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church; it is "a Eucharistic society, which only realizes its true nature when it celebrates the Supper of the Lord, receiving His Body and Blood in the sacrament."{22} "It is no coincidence," says Ware, "that the term 'Body of Christ' should mean both the Church and the sacrament." Where the Eucharist is, the Church is.{23}

There are other sacraments, too, in Orthodoxy, such as baptism, Chrismation (their equivalent roughly of Confirmation), Confession, and marriage. Customarily seven sacraments are listed, although there is no final word on the number. They aren't all equal in importance; some are more

significant than others, Baptism and the Eucharist being the most important. But all serve to convey the grace of Christ to His Church.

The Orthodox concept of the Church is extremely rich. There are aspects of their worship that many Evangelicals would find odd or uncomfortable (such as standing throughout the service) or even objectionable. But the attempt to bring the fullness of the kingdom into the worship service creates a rich and meaningful experience for the participants. Orthodoxy is unabashedly mystical. The worship service works to bring believers closer to a kind of mystical union with God. Here, the believer is to experience the presence of God and through it to eventually partake of the nature of God.

Icons and Deification

Let's look at two beliefs of the Orthodox Church that are quite unusual to evangelicals.

I've already noted the importance of the Incarnation for the sacramental view of Christianity and of the world. It is also important for understanding the Orthodox use of icons. An icon, Timothy Ware tells us, "is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world."{24} The use of icons reveals their view of matter, the created order. "God took a material body," says Ware, "thereby proving that matter can be redeemed. . . . God has 'deified' matter, making it 'spirit- bearing'; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then– though in a different way–can wood and paint. The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified."{25} Ware says that Nicolas Zernov's comments about the Russian Orthodox view of icons is true for Orthodoxy in general:

> *They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The colours and lines of the [icons] were not meant to imitate nature; the artists aimed at demonstrating that men, animals, and plants, and the whole cosmos, could be rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper 'Image.' The [icons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. . . . The artistic perfection of an icon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory—it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The icons were part of the transfigured world.{26}*

Orthodox don't worship icons, but rather venerate or reverence them. They are intended to remind the believer of God. Even those without theological training can learn from icons. But icons are more than a convenient teaching tool for Orthodox; they are thought to "safeguard a full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation." The Iconoclasts, it is thought (those who in the Orthodox Church fought *against* the use of icons), fell into a kind of dualism between defiled matter and the spiritual realm. "Regarding matter as a defilement, they wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ's humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must by saved and transfigured."{27}

Deification

One of the oddest teachings of Orthodoxy to evangelicals is that of the *deification* of man or *theosis*. The central message of Christianity is the message of redemption in Christ. Orthodox take quite literally the apostle Paul's teachings on

sharing in the message of redemption. "Christ shared our poverty that we might share the riches of His divinity; 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich, (2 Corinthians viii, 9). . . . The Greek Fathers took these and similar texts in their literal sense, and dared to speak of humanity's 'deification' (in Greek, *theosis*)." We are "called to become by grace what God is by nature." For this to happen, of course, Christ had to be fully man as well as fully God. "A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the Incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once."{28} Thus, "For Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification."{29}

Underlying the idea of deification or divinization is the fact of our being made in "the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity. . . . Just as the three persons of the Trinity 'dwell' in one another in an unceasing movement of love, so we humans, made in the image of the Trinity, are called to 'dwell' in the Trinitarian God. Christ prays that we may share in the life of the Trinity, in the movement of love which passes between the divine persons; He prays that we may be taken up into the Godhead."{30} Jesus prayed "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (Jn. 17:21) As Peter wrote: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Pet 1:4)

As the *image* of God, we are icons of God. There is a reflection of God in us by nature. However, we *grow* in the *likeness* of God, or "the assimilation to God through virtue." If we make proper use of our ability to have communion with God, "then we will become 'like' God, we will acquire the divine likeness. . . . To acquire the likeness is to be deified, it is to become a 'second god', a 'god by grace'." This is a goal we only acquire by degrees. "However sinful we

may be, we never lose the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our 'virtue', and so it is destroyed by sin."{31}

But will we be fully like God ourselves? To understand this doctrine, we must understand the difference between God's essence and His energies. God's essence is the core of His being. His energies are those characteristics by which we experience Him. "They are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind." We cannot know His essence, but we can know His energies. Our deification consists in our "union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism." We do not become one being with God. Nor do we become separate gods in our very essence. "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation." We are thus created gods.{32}

This deification involves the body, too. We will be transformed as Christ was in the Transfiguration, but the full transformation of our bodies will not come until the Last Day.

Several points can be made about the significance of deification. First, it is meant for all believers, not just a few. Second, the process doesn't mean we won't be conscious of sin in our lives. There is a continual repentance in the Christian life. Third, the means of attaining deification aren't extraordinary. They are simple: "go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments."{33} Fourth, it is a social process. The second most important commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't become divinized by ourselves. We realize the divine likeness as we live a common life with other believers such as that of the Trinity. "As the three persons of the Godhead 'dwell' in one another, so we must 'dwell' in our fellow humans."{34}

Fifth, deification is very practical. It involves the hands on application of Christian love, such as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc. Sixth, it "presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments," for it is here that we commune with God. "Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby we may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness."{35}

Evangelicals who are used to emphasizing a rational understanding of doctrine grounded in Scripture might find all this too vague. How can we hold to a doctrine of deification without falling into polytheism or pantheism? Once again we must take note of Orthodox mystical theology. Significant doctrines aren't always clearly parsed and laid out for understanding. Orthodox have a very "face value" kind of theology: if Scripture says we are gods, then we are gods.

Concluding Remarks

This look at the Eastern Orthodox Church has been necessarily brief and rather surface. I have attempted to provide a simple introduction without adding an Evangelical critique. It is my hope that listeners will seek to learn more about Orthodoxy, both for a better understanding of the history of the Christian church, and to prompt reflection on a different way of thinking about our faith. While we might have serious questions about certain doctrines and practices of Orthodoxy, we can't help but be enriched by others. The centrality of corporate worship as contrasted with our primary focus on the individual; the importance of beauty grounded in Christian beliefs contrasted with either the austerity of Protestant worship in the past or our present focus on personal tastes in aesthetics; the way fundamental doctrines such as that of the Trinity and the Incarnation weave their way throughout Christian belief and life in contrast to our more pragmatic way of thinking and living; these things and more make a study of the Orthodox Church an enriching experience. Even if one is simply challenged to rethink one's *own* beliefs, the effort is

worthwhile. Furthermore, in the context of the current culture wars it can only help to get to know others in our society who claim Jesus as Lord and seek to live according to the will of the one true God.

Notes

1. The writer has attempted to represent Eastern Orthodoxy by remaining true to its stylistic preferences, such as capitalizing references to the universal church and the particular sacraments (Baptism, Communion, etc.).

2. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

3. Ware, 53.

4. Ware, 232.

5. Ware, 225. Quotation from Bishop Theophan the Recluse.

6. “In Orthodox worship and spirituality tremendous emphasis in placed on both these events.” Ware, 226. “The theme of the Resurrection of Christ binds together all theological concepts and realities in eastern Christianity and unites them in a harmonious whole.” O. Rousseau, “Incarnation et anthropologie en orient et en occident,” in Irnikon, vol. xxvi (1953), p. 373, quoted in Ware, 226.

7. Ware, 229-30.

8. Ware, 211.

9. Ware, 229-30.

10. Ware, 8.

11. Ware, 240.

12. Ware, 241.

13. Ware, 242-243.

14. Ware, 239.

15. Ware, 196.

16. Ware, 197.

17. Keith Crim, ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of Religions*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), s.v. “Orthodox Churches” by V. Kesich.

18. Ware, 204.

19. Ware, 265.

20. Ware, 266.

21. Keith Crim, ed. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), s.v. “Sacraments,” by T.J. Talley.

22. Ware, 13.

23. Ware, 242.

24. Ware, 206.

25. Ware, 33-34.

26. Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (London, 1945), 107-08, quoted in Ware, 34.

27. Ware, 33.

28. Ware, 20-21.

29. Ware, 231.

30. Ware, 231.

31. Ware, 219.

32. Ware, 232.

33. Ware, 236.

34. Ware, 237.

35. Ware, 237-38.

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