That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade introduces the conversation.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I son realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of

a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission,* Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. “In front of abortion clinics,” says Colson, “Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies.” This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

> Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.{4}

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the “new ecumenism,” a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus’ Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent

me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.{5}

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.{6} Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it is very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.{7} At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In 1966 at theWorld Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. "Thereafter the ideological radicals increased," says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn "toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics."{8} It tried to form alliances around the "edges" of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church's role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won't last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity's critic. Oden says that, "We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined."{9}

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of picking and choosing one's truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they're really *true.* This isn't the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old

ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.{10}

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early ’90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.”{11} In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

> As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: “May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,{12} Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled “The Gift of Salvation,” which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,{13} the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn’t find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working something *in* us which becomes part of our justification(the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?{14}

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.{15} Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was “to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age.”{16} An important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: “The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united.”{17}

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don’t. The first is the culture war. Some

are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."{18} There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.
- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the endless joy of heaven."{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

> How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with it maintenance of the authority of

> Scripture and with it acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority. Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.{22} If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In

theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now. That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even *be* Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."{23} Having read some Catholic expositions of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I'm reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren't Christians at all. Again, this isn't to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one's understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of

evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don't know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, "Well, he's Catholic so he can't be saved."

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled "Ecumenical Jihad," in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.{24}

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is on Jesus' prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren't acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity "is a 'costly act' involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches."{25} Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families."{26} The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don't with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could

stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

> Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to accept the valuable help of their elucidation?{27}

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the "Decree on Ecumenism." Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. "The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals." He says:

> It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}
>
> Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the

> early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.
- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.
- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in

Christ."{31} It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous?)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent,* sess. 7, canon 8)."{32} *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent,* sess. 6, chap. 7).{33} Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise."{34}

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles' Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we're talking about different religions

altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be "brothers and sisters in Christ"?{35}

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: "The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake." This doesn't preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.{36}

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences

with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: "However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable."{37} A simple recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus' prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural crisis "is a recultivation of conscience."{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? "At root, every issue that divides the American people," Colson says, "is religious in essence."{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and

philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn't a unity of convenience, but a unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.
2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective, " in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.

3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.
7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the conference "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.
8. Tom Oden, "The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society," Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," First Things 43 (May 1994) 15-22.
12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in "Why I Signed It," *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.
13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, "Getting Justification Right," *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.
15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.
16. James S. Cutsinger, "Introduction: Finding the Center, in

Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.
17. Neuhaus, “A New Thing,” 57.
18. Oden, “The New Ecumenism.”
19. J.I. Packer, “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology,” in Cutsinger, 156.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.
21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I’ll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.
22. Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 251.
23. Packer, “On from Orr,” 174.
24. Peter Kreeft, “Ecumenical Jihad,” Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.
25. Avery Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism and the Future (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.
28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” 137-38.
29. Dulles, “Unity,” 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I’ve included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics,* xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone,* 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of "substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . ." and to "the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone." See "Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT," available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue," drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.html.
36. "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue." See also "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not "kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism." He believes that "Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul, it must not be deemed insurmountable." See his comments in "Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response," in *Christianity Today,* Oct. 7, 1996.
38. Packer, "On from Orr," 157.
39. Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 13.
40. Ibid., 14.

©2002 Probe Ministries.

The Enlightenment and Belief in God

The skepticism and relativism seen in our society today didn't just pop up out of nowhere. They received new life during the era of the Enlightenment. Rick Wade provides an overview of this important period.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

We are often tempted to think of our own day as truly unique, as presenting challenges that others have not known. Among other challenges, Christians in the West today have to deal with a foundational philosophical matter: namely, the question of the possibility of knowing truth. The mindset in our society today is either one of skepticism or of relativism. Skepticism says there is truth but we can't know it; relativism says there *is* no fixed truth. These mindsets affect all claims to truth, of course, but they are especially significant for Christians as we seek to proclaim the Gospel to others and hold onto it ourselves in these days of uncertainty.

Is the challenge of the loss of truth new? Not at all. There have been periods of skepticism throughout the history of the West. In this article we'll take a look at the era known as the Enlightenment, that period in the history of the West extending from the late 17th through the 18th centuries. What we'll see is that the very issues we're dealing with today were problems three centuries ago. Of particular concern to us will be the knowledge of God.{1}

Before looking at the Enlightenment itself, let's take a brief look at the mindset preceding this extraordinary era.

Prior to the Enlightenment, believing in God in the West was like believing in the sunrise; the answer to all the big questions of life *was* God (whether a given individual was inclined to *obey* God was another matter). The Bible was the source of knowledge about Him, especially the Old Testament, for there one could learn, among other things, the history of humankind and the divine purposes. Even political questions were to be solved by the Old Testament.

Everything was understood to work according to God's plan. The events of history were not chance occurrences, but events that served to carry out God's will. The universe was fairly young, having been created by God about 4000 years before Christ, and it was kept in operation through God's immediate involvement. The earth was at the physical center of the universe; since man was the highest level of creation, clearly God's purposes were centered on him.

For some people this picture of the world made for a comfortable home: nice and neat and orderly. However, the world was a mysterious and sometimes frightening place. This, along with the generally held belief in "that Last Judgment where many would be called but few chosen,"{2}

produced in some a pessimistic outlook. "'Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh,' said Sir Thomas Browne, 'nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity.'"{3}

Although the various major landmasses of the earth were known, other civilizations were not. Europeans knew little about other cultures. It was easy to believe that theirs was the highest civilization.

With the rise of science and the discovery of other civilizations came a new way of thinking about "God, man, and the world." Let's look at these briefly.

A Shift in Thinking

Science

In the Renaissance era, the world started getting bigger for Europeans. Knowledge increased rapidly, and from it followed major changes in life. The various strands of change merged in the Enlightenment, culminating in a new way of looking at the world.

A major shift took place in the world of science with the development of the ideas of such people as Francis Bacon (1561-1627). Bacon, an English philosopher and statesman, abandoned the classical deductive way of understanding nature handed down from Aristotle, championing instead an experimental, inductive approach. He rejected the authority of tradition, and provided "a method of experiment and induction that seemed to offer an infallible means of distinguishing truth and error."{4}

Although science was later to become the source of confidence for people in the West, in the early days scientific discoveries were unsettling. For example, the invention of the telescope resulted in the overturning of Aristotle's theory of the universe in which the earth, and hence man himself, was the center. Aristotle taught that the universe was a series of concentric spheres, one outside the other. "Copernicus and his successors shattered this world," says historian James Turner.{5}Now man was understood to live on a tiny planet flung out into a space that had no center. It was a time of great confusion. In the words of poet John Donne, "'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence [sic] gone.'"{6}The discovery that we aren't at the center of the universe made people wonder if we are truly significant at all.

More disturbing than this, however, were geological discoveries.{7} It appeared that the earth was older than the current understanding of the Old Testament, which seemed to

some to say the world was created about 4,000 years before Christ. The Bible had long been the authority on such matters. Could it be wrong? To question the Bible was to question Christianity itself. Because Christianity provided Europeans' their basic worldview, such questions were extremely troubling. *Exploration*

Voyages of discovery had a profound impact on Europeans' view of their place in the world and of their Christian beliefs. Discoveries of other civilizations made Europeans wonder if their Christian civilization was truly any better than any others. China was a particular problem. It apparently predated European civilization, and possibly even the Flood! Like the Europeans, the Chinese saw *themselves* as the center of the world. And China wasn't Christian!

Other more primitive societies presented their own difficulties. For example, reports of how gentle and loving American Indians were made people wonder about the doctrine of "original sin." They wondered, too, if it could be that God would destroy such people as these in a Flood.

Furthermore, if other civilizations were able to function without Christian beliefs, maybe Christianity itself wasn't so significant, at least on the cultural level. Maybe it was just one religion among many.{8} Norman Hampson concludes that "The intellectual challenge of non-European societies [were] a much more direct and fundamental challenge to traditional Christian beliefs than any which seemed likely to come from the scientists."{9}

Thus, the discoveries of science and of voyages first disrupted Europeans' orderly world, and then made people doubt the significance of their religion itself.

The New Cast of Mind

Shift in Knowledge Let's look more closely at changes in thinking that developed during the Enlightenment.

In the early 17th century, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) formulated a very rationalistic philosophy. His primary goal was to produce a logically certain argument for the existence of God. To do so, he employed what has come to be known as the *method of doubt*. Descartes believed we were to doubt any idea that wasn't "clear and distinct." The only idea he could hold in such a manner was that he himself existed. Hence the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." From there Descartes developed his philosophy in a logical, rational manner. He even approached nature from a deductive, rationalistic perspective. Beginning with general principles and known facts of nature, Descartes would deduce what the rest of nature should be like.

Although Descartes' way of looking at the world was overthrown by the experimental approach, his philosophy in general had a profound impact. He is considered by some to be the first modernist philosopher, for he looked for certainty in knowledge within the individual, not from an outside authority. Reason became more important than revelation.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was an immensely significant figure in the developing world of science. His discovery of the law of gravity showed that nature could be understood by man. Man would no longer be at the mercy of an unknown world. Newton's work was so significant for understanding nature that Alexander Pope was prompted to write, "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."{10}

John Locke (1632-1704) was another major thinker in the Enlightenment era. Historian Norman Hampson says, "the new currents of thought all seemed to flow together in [him]".{11}

Locke believed that knowledge by experience is superior to that which is accepted by belief and trust – "the floating of other men's opinions in our brains," as he called it.{12} He rejected the theory of innate ideas taught by Descartes, believing instead that our minds begin as blank slates to which is added knowledge by experience. Locke carried this approach into the realm of human nature and morality. He believed that "moral values arose from sensations of pleasure and pain, the mind calling 'good' what experience showed to be productive of pleasure."{13} Although Locke was a Christian, he set the stage for a naturalistic understanding of morality.

New Optimism

This new way of looking at the world, of listening first to experience rather than to tradition and the church, was a major characteristic of the Enlightenment. James Turner calls this a "new cast of mind." No longer were people to be dependent upon the Church to tell them about their world. Now they could learn about it in other ways.

In time the unsettling first wrought by scientific discovery was replaced by an "unprecedented optimism" based on the confidence in man's ability to "shape his material and social environment."{14} There was "a gradual and complex shift in the intellectual climate," Norman Hampson says. "As science seemed to establish itself on an impregnable basis of experimentally verified fact, doubt and confusion eventually gave way to self-confidence, the belief that the unknown was merely the undiscovered, and the general assumption—unprecedented in the Christian era—that man was to a great extent the master of his own destiny."{15}

Secularization and the Church

The findings of science had profound effects on people's thinking about God and their religion during the Enlightenment. However, science wasn't alone in this. Other

forces were at work pushing Europe into a new secularism.

The Beginnings of Secularization

As temporal rulers consolidated their power in Europe, the political power of the Church waned. Fragmented feudal kingdoms began to merge together into nation-states and assumed more power over the people. The Reformation sped up the secularization of politics as governments distanced themselves from the warring churches to maintain peace.

Capitalism and technology furthered the separation as they weakened the hold the Church had on the populace. Before the printing press was invented, for instance, the Church heavily influenced the flow of information in society. But now "the printing press effectively ended church regulation of learning."{16} Other secular institutions arose taking up more of people's lives in areas not governed by the Church. Trade, for example and all it involved– travel, the establishment of businesses, banks and stock exchanges- -added more institutions that were outside the control of the Church. As James Turner says, "The church's words, though still formidable, competed with a widening range of alluring voices that . . . did not have the church's vested commitment to defend Christianity."{17}

Secularization didn't *necessarily* undermine Christianity, however. People might actually have developed a firmer faith as a result of being able to read about and discuss the faith. It could be that "with worldly ambitions curtailed and legal powers short, the churches exercised deeper spiritual influence."{18} Nonetheless, in society the voice of the Church grew weaker.

The Church

The new experimental cast of mind had profound effects on religion and the Church. Religion now came under the same scrutiny as other areas of thought. Doctrine drew greater

attention since it suited the new concern with rational and orderly thought. Mystery was downplayed, and tradition lost significance. The new intellectual mood called for individuals to think matters through for themselves, and as a result, people began to divide over doctrinal differences. If "clear and distinct" ideas were what should be believed, as Descartes taught, then the individual person took on an authority previously held by tradition or the Church.

The Protestant Reformation played a major role in the fracturing of the Church and its loss of power. According to Norman Hampson, rival claims to leadership in the Church contributed most to the decline of its intellectual authority in society. If church leaders couldn't agree on what was true, who could? Although cutting edge thinkers were satisfied that traditional attitudes and assumptions should no longer prevail, they were not able to come up with clear alternatives. "The picture," says Hampson, "was one of a confused *mêlée*."{19}

Church leaders began "revising belief to fit the new intellectual style. . . . The very meanings of 'religion' and 'belief' began subtly to change . . . during the Middle Ages religion involved not so much assent to doctrines . . . as participation in devotion, particularly communal ritual. Religion was more a collective than an individual affair and collectively it came closer to a system of practice than a parcel of tenets, while individually it meant more a person's devoutness than his adherence to a creed."{20} In the Enlightenment, however, doctrines became more important than practice for some, and the result of doctrinal debates was the breakup of the Protestant Church into multiple denominations.

The Bible itself was subjected to the new way of thinking. First, since all texts of antiquity were now open to question, the Bible too became subject to rational scrutiny. Which parts were to be accepted as historically accurate and which rejected? Second, since scriptural teachings were no longer to

be accepted simply on the basis of authority, specific matters were brought up for debate – for example, the matter of the reality of hell.

Frenchman Richard Simon (1638-1712) subjected the Old Testament to such scrutiny. His book, *Critical History of the Old Testament,* was the first to examine the Bible as a literary product. He treated "the Old Testament as a document with a history, put together over time by a variety of authors with a variety of motives and interests, rather than a divinely-revealed unity."{21} Although his work was condemned across many Christian denominations, the die was cast, and others continued the same kind of analysis.

Political separation from the Church, new means of learning, the loss of tradition, dissension in the churches, doubts about Scripture—these things and more served to turn attention more to the secular than to the sacred.

Belief in God

Nature and God

All of this – the findings of science and exploration and the new experimental way of thinking, along with doubts about the validity and significance of Church teaching – took its toll on belief in God.

One concern was the relationship of God to nature. Newton believed God had to be actively involved in nature because the laws he discovered didn't seem to work uniformly throughout the universe. God had to keep things working properly.{22} For those like Newton, the findings of science were exhilarating; they saw them as God's means of ordering His world. "Even those few minds who had entirely given the universe over to orderly natural law," says Turner, "still needed to assume God's existence. For natural laws themselves presupposed a divine Lawgiver."{23}

Nonetheless, a distance developed between God and nature since nature was now understood in terms of natural laws that were comprehensible to men. René Descartes had believed that nature was to be understood in terms of ultimate realities. Thus, he kept science, theology, and metaphysics together. The new experimentalism of Bacon and Newton, however, separated them. "The modern conception of the natural world, understood as clearly distinguished from and even opposed to an impalpable spiritual world, was being invented," says Turner.{24} God was withdrawn more and more "as nature came to be understood . . . as governed by God through secondary causes."{25} He didn't disappear; He just adopted a new mode of operation. A mechanistic strain in science suggested a more impersonal Deity. God began to be thought of as a "divine Engineer."{26} Thus, scientists stopped concerning themselves with metaphysical answers. They looked to nature to explain itself.{27}

Now that God didn't seem to be necessary to the operation of the world, some began to doubt His reality altogether. Prior to the Enlightenment, atheism was a "bizarre aberration" for well over a thousand years in the West. One writer said that, "As late as the sixteenth century, disbelief in God was literally a cultural impossibility."{28} One couldn't explain the world without God. Growing vegetation, intellectual coherence, the orbits of the planets, the existence of life itself, morality—these and other issues all found their roots in God. With science now able to explain how the world worked, however, doubts about God began to rise. Belief in His existence now rested more on the idea of Providence, the beneficial acts of God on our behalf. It was believed that the earth was made for man's happiness, that there was a morally meaningful order to things, and there had to be a God to explain this.

However, with time there developed a more pessimistic view of nature, which lessened the force of Providence. Nature

produced poisonous plants and dangerous animals as well as good things. In the words of the poet William Blake:

> Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?{29}

While there was obviously no wholesale abandonment of belief in God, the foundations for belief seemed to be eroding. And when God's existence became debatable, says Turner, "the center fell out of Western intellectual life. If divine purpose did not undergird the cosmos, then whole structures of meaning collapsed and new ones had to be built up, brick by precarious brick."{30}

Natural Religion—Deism

Norman Hampson notes that, with the splintering of the Church in the Reformation, and with the pressure of looking at everything in terms of the new cast of mind, churches began making concessions in their teachings. "When the churches were prepared for so many concessions, and seemed encumbered rather than sustained by such dogma as they retained, there was a tendency for the educated to drift by easy stages from Christianity to natural religion."{31} Natural religion, or Deism, was religion divorced from the supposed "superstition" of revealed religion such as Christianity. Human reason unaided by revelation, it was thought, could lead thinking men to the truth of God. Deism was a very basic, not highly elaborated theistic belief. God was "a kind of highest common denominator of the revealed religions." In fact, some thought all the major religions worship the same God!{32} Natural religion was the religion of all mankind. It was centered on man, and it bound all men to a common moral law. Living right counted more than right doctrine. As Pope said,

> For Modes of Faith let graceless zealots fight;

He can't be wrong whose life is in the right.{33}

Apologetics

The need to prove the truth of Christianity would scarcely have crossed the mind of a medieval preacher.{34} "The known unbelievers of Europe and America before the French Revolution," says Turner, "numbered fewer than a dozen or two."{35} Now the possibility of an intellectually grounded atheism was very real. Fear of unbelief prodded Christian apologists into action.

There were four possible responses to problems created for belief by the many new ideas: to be ignorant of them, to firmly reject new ideas, to accept the new thinking but keep religion autonomous, and to recast Christian beliefs in terms of the new ideas. The latter was the route Deists and others took. "Reason and observation gave always the most certain knowledge of any reality that lay outside our minds," says Turner. "Belief for its own good must therefore be fitted to the new cast of mind."{36}

Some, like the Quakers, believed that belief in God eluded rationality. "On the contrary, the rationalizers insisted, belief in God was entirely reasonable and plausible," says Turner. "And they trimmed it accordingly where its reasonableness seemed shaky. They played down creeds in general and mysterious doctrines in particular. Truth could not be obscure. They repudiated the metaphysical flights of scholasticism, both Catholic and Protestant, in favor of common-sense arguments grounded in palpable reality. Truth must be plain to see. . . . The use of science soon became a phenomenally popular apologetic tool."{37}

Morality assumed greater importance as a test of the truth of the faith. As secularization pushed religion more to the private sphere, "emphasis fell increasingly on inner religiousness rather than externalities of ritual. Cultivation

of a clean conscience, then, seems to have become a more common test of inward sanctity, a measure of how close one stood to God."{38} Religion grew more preoccupied with everyday behavior.

This was important in apologetics, because it allowed an escape from concerns about divisive doctrinal concerns and the uncertainties of new philosophy. It had universal appeal. Human nature and conscience worked like natural law: they revealed the moral law in us as natural laws showed God's rational wisdom in nature. Turner comments:

> Ethics and physics confuted the atheist and confirmed the reasonableness of Christianity. The rational man demonstrated God and everything essential to religion . . . through the marks that Deity had left in this world, ready for reason and observation to discover. Only the fool stumbled into the pit of atheism or the mumbo-jumbo of mystery. . . . Good morals and a small clutch of plain, rational beliefs kept the Christian safe from unbelief and guided him to eternal reward.{39}

This attitude shaped the thinking of subsequent generations of apologists. Perhaps they did stave off atheism for a while. Turner tells us, "These believers . . . had come to terms with modernity and had refitted belief to sail in its waters. With much of the incomprehensibility and mysterious taken out of it, belief in God was now based more solidly in morality and rationality; that is, in tangible human experience and demonstrable human knowledge. Confusion and uncertainty, apologists might rationally hope, would now give way to a new confidence in reasonable and moral religion."{40}

Conclusion

In the Enlightenment, people were shaken by a new way of thinking that challenged the simple acceptance of tradition and religious authority, but their confidence was restored

through science and technology. Today, people are shaken by the loss of *this* confidence. We are seeing now that putting our confidence in our own ability to understand our world and fix it provides a shaky foundation. The need today is for both a reminder that truth *can* be known—ultimately through God's revelation in Christ- -and modesty in our knowledge, which recognizes that we do not now, and never will, know everything.

Notes

1. For an overview of the shift in thought from the premodern to the postmodern, see Todd Kappelman, "The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge," Probe Ministries, 1998, available on Probe's Web site at www.probe.org/the-breakdown-of-religious-knowledge/.
2. Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (New York; Penguin, 1968), 21.
3. Quoted in Hampson, 21.
4. Hampson, 36.
5. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 14.
6. John Donne in Turner, 15.
7. Hampson, 25.
8. Cf. James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 15-16.
9. Hampson, 27.
10. Pope, quoted in Hampson, 38.
11. Hampson, 38.
12. Locke, quoted in Hampson, 40.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Ibid., 23.
15. Ibid., 35.
16. Turner, 11.
17. Ibid., 13.

18. Ibid., 12.
19. Hampson, 31.
20. Turner, 23.
21. Byrne, 11.
22. Hampson, 77.
23. Turner, 27.
24. Ibid., 38.
25. Ibid., 37.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Hampson, 76.
28. Turner, 2.
29. William Blake, quoted in Hampson, 94.
30. Turner, xii.
31. Hampson, 103.
32. Ibid., 104.
33. Alexander Pope, quoted in Hampson, 105.
34. Turner, 8.
35. Ibid., 44.
36. Ibid., 29.
37. Ibid., 29-30.
38. Ibid., 31.
39. Ibid., 32,33.
40. Ibid., 34.

©2002 Probe Ministries.

Miracles

Miracles: What Are They?

Have you noticed how often the word *miracle* is used these days? Skin creams that make us look younger; computer technology; the transition of a nation from oppression to

freedom; what a quarterback needs to pull off for his team to have a winning season. All these are called *miracles* today. Anything that takes extreme effort or which amazes people is now a miracle. I'm still amazed that airplanes stay in the air. But is that a *miracle*?

To begin our discussion we'll first put forth a definition. To clarify the nature of a miracle will also require making distinctions in God's activities in creation. Then we'll respond to objections to the possibility of miracles. Finally, we'll consider their apologetic use.

So, what is a miracle? In his book, *All the Miracles of the Bible,* Herbert Lockyer said that a miracle is "some extraordinary work of deity transcending the ordinary powers of nature and wrought in connection with the ends of revelation."{1} Notice the three elements: miracles are supernatural, or the work of deity; they transcend or override natural law; and they are part of God's means of revealing His nature and purposes to us.

In Acts. 2:22, Peter speaks of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through" Jesus. This reference to *miracles* can also be translated *power*. Miracles demonstrate the supernatural power of God over nature and evil forces. This power was seen in Jesus' healing the sick; calming the storm; and raising people from the dead. Such events occurred in opposition to the normal course of nature; they could only be done by a supernatural power.

The word *wonders* refers to the response the miracles evoked in the observers, a response of astonishment and fear. Observers knew they had seen something out of the ordinary, something that in its greatness could even be threatening to them.

Still a third word used by Peter in Acts 2:22 points to the revelatory purpose of miracles. There, Peter referred to the *signs* of Jesus. This word stresses that aspect of miracles

which draws attention to the significance of the event. Signs point to or reveal something else.

First, they indicated a relationship between the miracle worker and God. In John 5:36 Jesus said that his works were evidence that he had been sent by God. Second, they pointed to a fuller activity of God still to come. As one writer said: "The power Jesus exhibited was a foretaste of the power to be revealed at the end of the age."{2}

Also, miracles are revelatory themselves in that they reveal the nature of God. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. He *said* he was the Savior, and he *showed* he was the Savior by doing saving things. He healed diseases; he delivered the demon-possessed; he saved from the fury of the storm.

So, miracles are from God; they override nature; and they reveal God. They aren't simply amazing events. When just about *anything* amazing is called a miracle simply *because* it's amazing, real miracles lose their significance.

Miracles and Providence

The word *miracle* is used so often and to describe so many things that it's lost its power. One of the reasons events are called miracles which shouldn't be—at least by Christians—is that we want to give due honor to God for His work in our lives. This is how it should be. However, in order to give miracles their due, we should distinguish the different kinds of activity of God in this world.

We can think of God's involvement in three categories. First, what we call *providence,* which is God's ongoing work in sustaining the universe He created and the people in it. He keeps the stars in place; He provides for our physical needs; and He is active in the governing of societies. People have come to learn that things work a certain way, whether they are believers in God or not. No explicit belief in God is

necessary to explain such things. Events on this level are not miracles.

Second, God is active in what we might call *special providence*. "Special providences," said theologian Louis Berkhof, "are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in deliverance out of trouble, and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances."{3} 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.

Our move to Texas to work with Probe is an example. When we survey all the events that led up to our move, we recognize that God had to have been involved. But that's because we set these events in the context of the thinking, the decisions, and the prayers of people who sought God's will. However, people who aren't inclined to see God working in our lives would see nothing supernatural about such events. They might simply see that we made a decision to move, the leadership of Probe and our church concurred, and a bunch of other people who support us agreed. Is this type of occurrence a miracle? In my opinion it isn't. Although God was involved in a special way, the laws of nature weren't transcended.

The third category of God's involvement is *miracles* that we defined earlier as events, which are supernatural in origin, transcend or violate natural laws, and serve a revelatory function in God's redemptive work. Here the hand of God is clearly visible to anyone who doesn't deliberately refuse to believe. The event is contrary to the normal course of nature; no scientific explanation is possible. Of a purported miracle, we might ask this question: Is it impossible that the event could have taken place without God's special intervention to alter the inevitable course of nature?

These three categories are not rigidly divided. They form more of a continuum. The distinguishing mark is the visibility of

God's hand in a given event. Is He in the background, simply maintaining His created order? Or has He manipulated certain events to a certain end without making His presence clearly seen by all? Or has He acted so powerfully in the realm of nature that there is no other reasonable explanation?

The purpose of such considerations is that we might not use the word *miracle* too lightly. To accomplish their role, miracles must remain distinct from that which is simply amazing.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and Natural Law

Miracles have come under attack for centuries now. In short, objectors seem to assume that *our* lives' experience is normative. With respect to *environment*, it is assumed that what we see in nature is all there is or can be. With respect to *time,* also, critics say that our experience *today* determines what could have happened *yesterday*, or that our limitations do not allow us to know what happened in the past. Let's consider first the question of nature, and then at the problem of historical knowledge with respect to miracles.

Miracles came under heavy attack during the Enlightenment by deists and atheists, and later by liberal churchmen. In the heady days of the rise of science, many came to see miracles as violations of natural law. To the rationalists of that day, such a violation was an impossibility. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, put it this way: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{4}

This raises two questions. First, are natural laws inviolable? Second, how do we interpret the evidence?

First, the question of natural law. Some critics believe simply that there is no power higher than nature and thus no power that could supersede the laws of nature. This is naturalism, a philosophical belief that can't itself be proved by what is seen in nature. This is a philosophical assumption, and we shouldn't be put off by it. We believe that God exists, and being the creator of the natural laws, He is above them Himself and able to alter them. They don't. To undermine the possibility of miracles, naturalists must prove there is no God to perform them. On the other hand, if we can show that non-natural events *did* or *have* occurred, the naturalist will have to find some explanation in his worldview for them.

Other critics may not argue from an atheistic standpoint, but they hold that a universe in which natural laws can be broken is inherently unstable. If miracles occurred, all would be chaos. We answer that if God is powerful enough to create nature and to override its laws, He is also powerful enough to keep the rest of nature in order.

Thus, the reality of natural law is no deterrent to miracles.

Second, how do we weigh the evidence for and against miracles? What about Hume's objection that there is more evidence *against* miracles than *for* them? First, the abundant evidence of order at most suggests that miracles are the rare exception. But this is what makes them so significant! Consider, too, that the proper use of evidences includes being open to new evidences, including those of unusual occurrences. Second, evidences should be *weighed*, not just *counted*. So, to illustrate, we are more likely to accept the testimony of one person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts.

As I noted earlier, arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. But there is another kind of objection to miracles. That is, that history can't bear the weight of

proving miracles occurred in the past. We'll turn our attention to that objection next.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and History

We have looked briefly at David Hume's argument against miracles based on natural law. On the surface, Hume's argument was against *proving* a miracle, not against the *reality* of miracles *per se*. His main point was that we can't *know* whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always *for* natural law and *against* miracles. He believed that it would be more likely, that, for example, all the witnesses *lied* than that a person was raised from the dead. How was Hume so sure of this? "Because," he said, 'that has never been observed in any age or country."{5} So, when someone *said* they *saw* a miracle, Hume said they were deluded or were lying because no one's ever seen a miracle! It seems clear that Hume's argument against *knowing* whether a miracle occurred was based upon his prior *conviction* that miracles don't occur.

Of course, if no evidence could be sufficient to prove miracles in the present, records of miracles in history were surely faulty. If we don't experience miracles today, Hume thought, there's no reason to think others did in the past.

Anthony Flew, a contemporary philosopher, has built on Hume's argument. He says there must be uniformity between the present (the time of the historian) and the past (when the event took place) to make any reasonable interpretation of the past. This is called the *rule of analogy*. The regularities of nature are part of our present experience, and we must assume they were the experience of people in the past.

This argument presupposes that there are no miracles occurring now. How do critics know this? Either they must be omniscient, or they must begin with a naturalistic worldview which by

definition precludes miracles. One also wonders how Flew could accept *any* unique, singular event in history, such as the origins of the universe and of life, if regularity is a requirement for historical knowledge.

Other critics say the problem is with the study of history *per se*. They argue that historical knowledge is too subjective for us to know what really happened in the past. Our own values, worldviews and prejudices color our understanding so that there aren't any historically objective facts. But if this is so, the critic's own judgment about historical knowledge is too colored by his own values, etc., to be taken as objective fact. As philosopher Frances Beckwith notes, this also means that no interpretation of history can be considered bad, and that there is no reason to revise history (except perhaps for the historian's amusement).{6}

It would seem that those who deny miracles are typically predisposed against them. If this is the case, is there any apologetic use for miracles? Let's look at this next.

The Apologetic Use of Miracles

"Miracle was once the foundation of all apologetics, then it became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear." So said a German theologian in the early part of this century.{7} While it's true that evidential apologetics emphasizes the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in general play little role in apologetics today.

What's the proper role of miracles in apologetics? First, of course, Christians need to answer the charge that miracles can't happen, and that the Bible, therefore, isn't true. Miracles are an integral part of Christianity; to side-step objections to them by downplaying their role is to abandon the cause.

But what about persuasion? In Scripture, were miracles used as evidence to persuade unbelievers?

We see in the New Testament that miracles *did* serve as evidence and they brought some people to belief. When Jesus raised Lazarus "many of the Jews . . . put their faith in Him" (Jn.11:45; see also Acts 2:22-41; 5:12-16; 6:7,8; 8:6-8; Rom. 15:18,19). But note that some went to the Pharisees and ratted on Jesus.At other times Jesus chastised the Pharisees because they believed neither His words nor His works (Jn.10:22-32; 15:24). Not everyone believed in response to miracles (cf. Acts 14:3,4).

Remember that Jesus didn't do miracles for people who had no faith-such as the people in His hometown (Matt. 13:58)—or for those who insisted that He prove Himself to them-such as the Jewish leaders (Matt. 16:1-4). When He ministered in His hometown, for instance, people took offense at Him, and Matthew says, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith". Matthew also reports that Jesus refused the Jewish leaders when they came to Him "and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven" (16:1-4)

No, Jesus' miracles were done in response to faith. But this wasn't necessarily explicit faith in Jesus as Savior. It could have been simply the openness to God of people who were willing to hear. By doing miracles, Jesus identified himself as the Messiah who had been prophesied.{8} People either recognized the fulfillment of prophecy or simply recognized the hand of God, or both.

Someone might ask, even if people won't accept miracles, might they not respond to the simple preaching of the cross? Remember that miracles were part of God's revelation of His redemptive activity. They were set in the context of the spoken message of Jesus. People who refused the spoken word also refused to accept the evidence of miracles. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus' parable, "If they do not listen

to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Lk.16:31)

Thus, in answer to the question whether miracles can bring people to belief in Christ, they can if the deep-down knowledge of God that Paul said we all have (Rom.1:20) is first awakened. But for those who have deliberately shut God out of their lives and their worldview, miracles won't do any more to convince them than hearing Scripture will.

Miracles, then, provide evidence for the identity of Jesus and for the truth of the message He proclaimed especially when paired with prophecy. They should thus be a part of the package of evidences we employ. We will not convince everyone of the truth of Jesus Christ. But if God chose miracles as confirming evidence, we should not shun them.

Notes

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 13-14.

2. Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Might," by O. Betz

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 168.

4. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Activity in History* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 89-90

7. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

8. Ibid., 286-87.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

The World in Our Worship

Worship is an essential part of the Christian life. Rick Wade briefly considers a few essentials of corporate worship, and then looks at three characteristics of secular thought which undermine proper worship.

Choices in Worship

Church historian Bruce Shelley reports on a speaking engagement he had with a group of senior adults about recent changes in evangelical churches. When he mentioned drums in worship, he said, "even the breath-taking surroundings [of the Colorado Rockies] couldn't suppress the sanctified outrage" he heard. "Like a match dropped on a haystack," he said, "the room erupted first in a corporate groan, followed by an outburst of laughter."{1} Clearly such changes don't sit well with many Christians. Those who appreciate a more traditional approach to worship are concerned that the contemporary style of worship risks diluting the message of the church by modeling itself on the secular entertainment industry in its style, and thus risks the accommodation of the message to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, those who believe the traditional approach has become outdated are accepting contemporary worship widely. For some, the change is simply a matter of taste: they like contemporary music and a relaxed atmosphere. For others, contemporary worship seems like a better approach to reach today's generations. In his book, *The Second Coming of the*

Church, George Barna makes this startling statement: “After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”{2} The church is not effectively speaking to its surrounding culture, he says, and is becoming largely irrelevant. Adapting worship services is one part of addressing this problem.

Still a third worship option for evangelicals who are tired of traditional worship but think the contemporary style is inadequate as well, is that of liturgical worship. Through the ceremony and ritual of liturgical services conducted in settings with objects rich with symbolism, some Christians look for a special encounter with God. The October 6, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today* had on its cover a picture of a woman with a glazed look in her eyes. Above her head was the question: “Missing God at church?”{3} A student interviewed in the cover article said this about her church background: “There was no imagination, no mystery, no beauty. It was all preaching and books and application.” Another student spoke of the loss of the sense of the divine in worship today. “Gymnasiums and impermanent buildings” have replaced “the splendor and holiness of cathedrals,” she said. “Plastic cups and folding chairs aren’t enough,” she continued. “There has to be an environment that communicates God’s holiness to my senses and to my spirit.”

A fourth option for worship is one championed by Robert Webber: that of blended worship. This is especially appealing to young people. It reflects, to a degree, postmodern thinking. We are no longer restricted to choosing one style over another. Now that the rigid demands of modernism have broken down, people feel free to choose facets of different styles to form something new.

Some might think that differences between worship services are really merely stylistic. Each person has his or her preferences regarding worship, right? Some prefer one style,

some another. But are the differences only stylistic? Is it true that worship style is basically a matter of individual preference? Are there any objective criteria for corporate worship? If there are, then we can look for the necessary elements as we consider a certain style of worship.{4} On the other hand, we can also look for things to avoid in worship, things that would hinder true worship. Are influences from secular culture coming into the church and adversely affecting our worship?

Let's consider first some goals of corporate worship. Following that, we'll consider three cultural forces that serve to undermine proper worship.

Three Goals of Worship

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down,*{5} Marva Dawn says there are three goals of worship: praising God, building up the community, and nurturing the believer.

Praising God

The obvious answer to the question "Why do we worship?" is, "To give praise and glory to God." Said the Levites, "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!" (Neh. 9:5). In praise we have our focus on God and not ourselves. At least we think we do.

However, too often our thoughts about God center around what He has done for *us*, for *me*. Consider, for example, the songs many of us sing in church. So many of them have *I* as the real subject. God is praised for what He means to *me*.

Is it wrong to praise and thank God for what He has done for me? Not at all! Of course, we should do this. The problem is this: we come to worship God in His *fullness*, but we end up praising Him for what *we've* experienced. The being and work of God is reduced to the limits of our own experience! But we're

dealing with the transcendent One here! The One who spoke the stars into existence, who cares for all others in His family the same as He cares for me, and all at the same time! God's project is bigger than I am. God's being is bigger than what I have personally experienced. In addition to praising God for what He has done for us individually, we should be worshiping God for the things He does that have nothing to do with us in particular. By worshiping Him in His fullness we open ourselves up for riches we didn't expect and maybe never even imagined.

Building Up the Body

In worship we also build up the community of faith. We are part of something much bigger than our own church or denomination; we are part of something which began two millennia ago and which will continue to grow until the Lord returns.

What does this have to do with worship? First, when we come together for worship we are a worshiping *community*, not just a bunch of individuals gathered in the same room. When we are together we can turn from our occupation with ourselves and focus on the development of God's people as a body. We are not to mirror our narcissistic and individualistic society, but rather to turn outward to the community. Says Dawn, "Worship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members."{6}

Second, in worship we can also hear from members of the church from generations past through their writings and art. In turn, we nurture and protect that which we have inherited so we can pass it on intact to succeeding generations. Worship aids significantly in this project. Says Dawn, "Worship forms us; all the elements of the service develop the character of believer in us. And worship forms the community if it unites

us in common beliefs, traditions, renewal, and goals. Worship schools us in the language of faith as we listen and sing and participate in its rites." She continues: "We can only pass on the faith if it has nurtured our character to be its carriers and if we are part of a community, the Church, that has carried the faith down through the ages."{7}

So, when we sing, for example, do we draw into ourselves and enjoy our own private worship? Or are we purposefully singing *with* other believers, lifting up one sound of praise to God? Do we come to church with our focus on what *we* hope to get out of the service? Or are we thinking about how we are going to lift others before the Lord? Are we listening to Christians from ages past who have dealt with some of the same ideas and issues we struggle with? And are we thinking about those who will come after us, about the legacy we will leave behind?

The individualism of our age fights us here. It sets us up to be a lot of little Christian islands in a sanctuary or auditorium. We are not many individuals who just happen to have a religious bond. What we are really is a body made up of many members. Worship that recognizes God as the subject will be worship that builds up His body.

Nurturing Character

Another goal of worship is the nurturing of our character. Worship should transform us as a result of being brought into the presence of the living God. It was entering the sanctuary of God that gave Asaph a right understanding of God and His ways with men, which took away Asaph's bitterness (Ps. 73). Think of Isaiah, who was made whole and prepared to serve after beholding the glory of God and his own sinfulness (Is. 6). This isn't just a matter of growing in faith and going deeper in our prayer life. It's also a matter of becoming good people, people whose character is like that of Jesus!

Too often, however, *our* idea of being transformed is leaving

church feeling good! We want to feel better about ourselves, to be lifted up! Yet, we all know in the normal course of life that building up often means tearing down first. This is especially the case when we think about being conformed to the image of Christ. In fact, Marva Dawn says that worship ought to *kill* us. What does she mean by this? She says:

> "In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God's Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness . . . . Once worship kills us, we are born anew to worship God rightly."{8}

Worship, then, serves to praise God, build up the community, and nurture our character.

Subjectivism: Worship Beginning With Me Rather Than With God

Let's begin looking at three forces, which work to undermine proper worship: subjectivism, self-focused individualism, and dumbing down the message. Our critique will not be focused on any particular worship style. Indeed, these problems can be found across the spectrum.

"Me" As Subject

Let's begin with subjectivism. This is a common attitude today. I find what is true and good within myself. My personal experience is what counts.{9} Therefore, I am the judge of what is worthwhile in my worship. I expect the sermon to be on my level (none of that heavy theology stuff), the music to suit the tastes I've already developed, and the service time to not be too long. And the service is evaluated by how I feel when it's over. What matters is *my* spiritual experience *now*.

Seeing God As Subject As Well As Object

The problem here is that the center of worship is *I*, not God. Although I might be directing my thoughts toward God, I am patterning my worship so as to satisfy *myself*. The effect is that my understanding of God is restricted to what He has done in my life; my view of God is thus limited by my experience. When *my* experience of God sets the limits, I'll have a shrunken view of God.

The key to getting God fully into the picture is to see Him as the *subject* of worship, and not just the *object*. What do I mean by this? Says theologian Marva Dawn, "The gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence."{10} The content of our worship *comes* from Him; He is the source. He gives us Himself, tells us His characteristics, and informs us of His plans. Having received this we turn back to God and make Him the *object* of our worship, giving it all back to Him in praise. As one writer puts it, "Worship . . . is an encounter in which God's glory, Word, and grace are unveiled, and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration." In our worship, we "recognize a Lord whose majesty evokes strong praise, petition, and transformation."{11} When we worship, we are reflecting God back to God. In filling our vision with God, we are met by Him. If we engineer our worship to meet *our* needs as we see them, on the other hand, we risk missing out on being touched by God in unexpected but vital ways.

I'd like to make one other point. With God as subject or source of worship, grace once again becomes central, for grace is the theme of His works on our behalf. When *we* are the subjects, however, *our* actions are the focus making *law* central. This leads to an emphasis on what *we* must do, rather than what *God* has done.{12}

On Worship Killing Us

With God as the subject of worship, it then becomes a vehicle of transformation in His hands. As I noted earlier, worship

ought to *kill* us. It ought to make us see the great distance between God and ourselves. Once in God's presence our sinful nature is put to death. Then we are ready to be infused with His life.{13}

Worship is a subversive act, Dawn insists. We don't come before God to get His stamp of approval on our interests and agendas. God intends to turn us upside down. As Dawn says, "If the Church's worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God's truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it. Worship will turn our values, habits, and ideas upside-down as it forms our character; only then will we be genuinely right-side up eternally."{14}

When we have the attitude that the worship service is provided primarily to fix our individual problems, we get the cart before the horse. We aren't interested in being brought low before God. But it is only in being brought low that we can be lifted up, because it is only then that we both see our real need and surrender ourselves to God to do with as *He* pleases, not as we please.

We thus recognize God as both subject and object of worship, as the One who fills us with Himself, and as the One upon whom we shift our focus for our time of corporate worship.

Self-Focused Individualism: Worship Focused on Me Rather Than on the Body

One of the weaknesses of the church in modern times has been the failure to give due recognition to the fact that we are part of a community of faith. Ours is a narcissistic age; we've been taught to be self-absorbed in our "I did it my way" culture. Marva Dawn notes that in her observation of the church today Christians "rarely . . . think in terms of 'we' instead of 'I'."{15}

The Body Present, Past and Future

We aren't just a bunch of individuals thrown together in some loose confederation. We are a *body* that extends geographically around the world at the present, and which extends back in time 2000 years and forward until the Lord returns.

How can the church address this individualistic attitude? Dawn believes "that worship which keeps God as subject is the most important key, for God is the Creator of community and the preserver of the Church. . . . [W]orship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members."{16} In our worship we study Scripture together, we speak the words of the great creeds to each other, we sing as one voice, we agree in prayer. Such things foster in us a sense of oneness, of being part of a unity.

As we are part of the community present in our own day, we are also part of a community that began with the apostles and that will continue until the Lord comes. In our worship services the past can remain a part of the present through the inclusion of the wisdom of our forefathers through their writings, prayers, and liturgies. As I mentioned earlier, there is a new interest in liturgical worship among young people. Ancient writings "are seen as providing needed maturity as well as a connection to the faith of the church historical."{17} Also, the awareness that we are leaving a legacy for those who come after us provides an encouragement to transmit and maintain a correct understanding of God in our worship. A renewed understanding of the importance of the community of faith, then, gives us a foundation upon which to stand, and makes us aware of our responsibility to others.

Speaking to our Society

There is positive change in this regard in churches attuned to

the situation of the younger generations. One of the characteristics of modernism was the psychological isolation it produced. We have been thinking in terms of personal needs and choices rather than in terms of obligations to the group. Against the existential idea that *my* experience *now* is what makes me what I am, leaving me essentially rootless and radically free, Christians find their identity in the enormous body of believers made alive through faith in Christ. Today, however, young people are crying out for community, and churches are meeting this challenge through various means. This is a key area where the church reveals its eternal relevance to the human situation; to ignore it will impoverish the church body, and will make Christianity seem truly irrelevant to the younger generations.

Dumbing Down the Message

A third problem sometimes found in churches today is that of "dumbing down" the message in an effort to make it understandable to everyone equally, even to non-believers who may be visiting.

While we should welcome nonbelievers into our churches, we have to ask whether keeping our worship on an elementary level is worth the cost of holding believers at the level of nonbelievers or new believers.

We need to remember first of all that the church is . . . well, the *church*. It's the body of Christ made up of those who have been taken hold of by the Savior. It isn't *un*believers. Worship is the work of believers, and the worship service should be geared toward them. It should not be governed by what the general population finds acceptable. As Martin Marty has said, "To give the whole store away to match what this year's market says the unchurched want is to have the people who know least about the faith determine most about its expression."{18}

Bringing People Up Rather than Dumbing the Message Down

Part of the mission of the church is bringing people into the kingdom, and our worship services can be good places to do this. But if in our worship we water down the message, we are robbing the visitor of the full truth he or she needs to hear. If we don't give visitors an idea of how big God is, in the long run we won't keep them. Why should they stay if they get little more than they can get outside the church? Church historian Martin Marty said this:

> This writer fears that we are on the verge of seeing happen what happened in the 1950s to mainstream Protestant churches; they retooled for people who were casually attracted and liked big parking lots, spectacle, and low demands; and the people left as easily as they came.{19}

One of the problems of the liberal church this century was that in its effort to be timely and relevant it "plunged more deeply into the needs and wishes of human beings—or a God sculpted more closely to the image of man."{20} The attempt to keep God up-to-date winds up allowing "the world to call the tune for God." It ignores the complexity of God; it forgets "the tensions that must exist between human's wishes and the Creator's intentions."{21}

We must relate the message in accessible ways, but we needn't assume that people can't learn or aren't willing to be stretched. The things of God, not the sensibilities of contemporary culture, should be the measure of our worship.

On Christians Getting Their "Meat" Elsewhere

Some might say that Christians can get their real "meat" in Sunday schools or in other separate study time. We forget that we learn about God through all parts of worship, and not just from the didactic teaching of a sermon or Sunday school class. To suggest that Christians get the "meat" of the faith in Sunday school is to reveal a modernistic bias in favor of head

knowledge; i.e., the idea that knowing is simply a matter of adding to our mental database. Some might say that we are worshiping in Sunday school when we are being taught facts and ideas. But this is only a part of worship. Corporate worship is a special time for interaction with and getting to know God on multiple levels.

What is lost by not developing our understanding of God in the context of *worship*? Worship takes us beyond mere head knowledge; there is interaction between God and man and between Christians. In Sunday school we listen; in worship we listen and then talk back to God. It is like the difference between reading about someone and talking with him or her.

The goal in all of this is to see God as fully as we can and be touched by Him. We use words and images and whatever else we need to lift us up to God, to let Him speak to us through whatever means are available.

Conclusion

Although someone will be hard pressed to find in Scripture a clear description of a proper worship style, we can find principles of proper worship, which apply whether one uses electric guitars or organs or no instruments at all. Furthermore, we can be careful to weed out of our worship-indeed, out of our thinking generally-ideas and attitudes that do not accord with what Scripture teaches. Subjectivism, individualism, and the dumbing down of the Word of God should not characterize our worship. It is hard to stand against one's culture, especially since we're all influenced by it. But we need to do it, for the health of the body and the individual, and for the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, "Why Does Worship Keep Changing?" *Christian Reader*, December 1996.

www.christianitytoday.com/cr/6r6/6r6049.html. This article gives a brief overview of the changes in worship since the Puritans. See also Robert Webber, Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 97-101.

2. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.

3. Gary Burge, "Missing God at Church," *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1997, 20-27.

4. See Jerry Solomon, "Worship," available on our web site at www.probe.org/docs/worship.html.

5. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.)

6. Dawn, 133.

7. Dawn, 149.

8. Dawn, 206.

9. See Donald G. Bloesch, "Whatever Happened to God?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 2001, 54-55.

10. Dawn, 80.

11. Burge, 22.

12. Dawn. 236.

13. Dawn, 206.

14. Dawn, 58.

15. Dawn, 131.

16. Dawn, 133.

17. Daniel Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1999. www.christianitytoday.com/le/912/912037.html on Jan. 11, 2001.

18. Martin E. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot, and the People Will Come (and Go)," *Context* 25, no. 4 (15 Feb. 1993): 3-4. Quoted in Dawn, 258.

19. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot," quoted in Dawn, 258.

20. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 113. Quoted in Dawn, 299.

21. Turner, quoted in Dawn, 300-301.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church

Rick Wade examines the nature of the gospel message as oral tradition in the early church, and the relation of that tradition with the New Testament.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Introduction: Evangelicals and Tradition

Evangelical Protestants have historically considered the Bible to be the final source for faith and practice. Church tradition plays little or no role in our lives beyond the celebration of certain holidays. In this article, I want to look at one context in which tradition was very important in the church. I'm referring to the relationship between tradition in the early church and Scripture. In this study, I'll refer often to the book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*{1} by Daniel Williams, an ordained Baptist minister teaching patristics at Loyola University.

Most of us don't realize that tradition played an important role in the establishment of our faith. We tend to see the New Testament and its development as separate from the life of the early church. In fact, if there's a dirty word in church history to evangelicals, it is "tradition." We think of tradition as something man comes up with on his own. Since what man produces is tainted, we want to keep it separate from Scripture. We don't think of the Scriptures—specifically the New Testament—as being a written form of tradition.

We need to note, however, that all tradition isn't bad. What the apostles learned from Jesus, they handed on to others orally, and what they handed on they called "tradition." Thus, the Gospel proclamation began as oral tradition. Recall Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6; see also 2:15. The NIV translates the word "tradition" as "teachings.") The apostles taught people who taught others who taught others, and this tradition was authoritative for the church. As the tradition was being conveyed orally, it was also being written down by the apostles and sent throughout the church. As the various local churches received these writings they weighed them against what had been taught orally. Many writings were circulating at the time, some of which falsely carried the names of apostles. The major test for the authenticity of these writings was whether they accurately reflected the apostolic tradition as taught in the churches.

Losing the Past

If evangelicals attempt to study the past, it's typically out of historical interest alone, not with a view to being taught by our forebears. While we're doing better at crossing boundaries with our contemporaries in the church, we forget that the church extends back in time as well. We tend to isolate the church in the here and now.

How is it that we've become separated from our past?

Individualism

First, we're an individualistic church. A fairly prevalent attitude in the church is that "me, my Bible, and the Holy Spirit" are all that we need to understand Christianity. In

most debates today, what is the final word? “Well, it seems to me that . . .” It is considered impolite or even arrogant to tell someone he or she is wrong, especially in the area of religion and morality. This attitude has penetrated the church as well. It is considered rude and pretentious to say that someone’s understanding of something in Scripture is wrong, no matter how gently and lovingly it is said. We think, “Why should we need anyone else to tell us what the Bible means?” We have let modernistic individualism take root in our psyches to the extent that we believe we are individually the final arbiters of truth.

Some consequences of this attitude, however, are disunity in the church, and the possibility of the intrusion of false teaching as individuals attempt to understand the faith by themselves. While we certainly are responsible individually to be in the Word and seeking to understand it, we learn from a study of church history that it is the lone interpreter of Scripture who can easily go astray. Theologian Harold O. J. Brown notes that “Solitary study, cut off from the fellowship of believers seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and lacking any awareness of the faith of the church through the ages, is often a source of serious error.”{2} “Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church,” says Robert Webber. “It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history.”{3} As Daniel Williams notes, “Protestants must reconsider the work of the Holy Spirit in the life history of the church no less than in the life of the individual believer. For it is with the church that God’s new covenant was formed.”{4} The Spirit is working to build the body of Christ, not just individuals. Each of us needs the church.

Anti-traditionalism

A second problem is our anti-traditional attitude. There have been several influences on our thinking about tradition. The Enlightenment era was very significant in this regard. 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 had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today?{5} Besides, the church dominated people in the past. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.

This new attitude had an effect on the handling of Scripture. Bible scholar Christopher Hall writes, "Evangelical scholars assented to the Enlightenment's deep suspicion of tradition and proceeded to produce a traditionless hermeneutic. The 'Bible alone' survived the Enlightenment assault against tradition, but only by becoming a timeless text filled with facts to be scientifically identified, analyzed and categorized."{6} Now we were to interpret Scripture individually through a simple examination of the facts. "As [historian] Nathan Hatch observes, the Bible 'very easily became . . . 'a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.'"{7} There was no need to look to the past for help.

Thus, evangelicals came to believe that simply by using their reason under the guidance of the Spirit they could understand the Bible as it was intended. Tradition and the history of exegesis no longer mattered. For some, it was a mark of triumph to be able to say one wasn't affected by what anyone else said about the meaning of the text. Some actually believed that a *lack* of formal training was beneficial for

understanding Scripture!{8} Mark Noll sees this as "bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations."{9}

The Enlightenment's anti-traditional stance was fostered to some extent by Pietism, the 19th century movement encouraging a return to Scripture and ministry by lay people. Pietism served as a corrective in a church which had given the work of the kingdom over to the professional ministers. For all the good that it wrought, however, its emphasis on the individual and his or her religious experience encouraged a focus only on the here and now. The larger church, especially the church in time past, wasn't so important.

The Free Church Tradition

Following the Reformation, the Protestant Church split into multiple denominations or traditions. Out of the Anabaptist branch grew what is called the Free Church tradition. This includes such offshoots as the Baptist, Evangelical Free, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal and Bible churches. A core belief is that "the church is not an institution on account of its structure or external rites, but exists only when it is voluntarily composed of the faithful." Williams further explains: "There is little or no sacramental attribution to any place, thing or ritual, because only the believing members of the congregation are holy by reason of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. . . . The believer is free, therefore, to follow the faith in accord with his or her conscience . . . having no other ultimate authorities than the Bible and the Holy Spirit."{10} Thus, there is a rejection of authoritative tradition of the church.

For whatever good this brought about, it also meant "The councils, the creeds, the grand theologians, the apologists, and the philosophers—all could now be abandoned." Protestants tend to look only as far back as the Reformation if they look

to the past at all. What we must understand, though, is that the Reformers were trying to restore apostolic Christianity. In their disputes with Roman Catholics, they sometimes referred to the church Fathers directly or indirectly to prove they weren't guilty of theological novelty.{11} For all their efforts to restore the church to what it should be, what followed them was a splintering "into a multitude of conflicting versions of the faith."{12} In time, that which was common to all, the tradition of the apostles, was diminished in favor of an emphasis on our differences.

This way of looking only as far back as the Reformers has produced "a huge gap in the historical consciousness of the Free church."{13} We have little sense of historical continuity with the church from the early days up to the Reformation. Williams believes we are in real danger of amnesia, of losing our roots, of forgetting who we are. "The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining 'center' of Christian belief and practice."{14}

Constantine

Occasionally one will find references to the idea of a "fall" of the church following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. Some believe that under Constantine the church began its slide into a state religion, having been corrupted by power and money. The interests of church and state overlapped, resulting in the corruption of the church. This cast a pall over the whole of church history until the Reformation. Tradition is seen as an element of the corrupted, institutionalized church.{15}

While it is true that the new freedom the church experienced under Constantine did have its negative side, it doesn't follow that the church "fell" as some say. Throughout history the church has made mistakes in its dealings with secular

society and in knowing how to properly handle the freedom and power it has experienced. Some complain *today* that Christians become too wedded to political parties, courting compromise in the process. This was no different in Constantine's day. That there was a new coloring to the church when it became established under Constantine, there is no debate. But the idea that the church quickly became corrupt, and that the councils convened during his reign were simply pawns of the emperor is simplistic. The church continued to be faithful to the task of clarifying and passing on the apostolic tradition. "The faith professed and practiced in the early churches was not determined by the political machinations of emperors and episcopal hierarchies," says Williams. "The essential formulation and construction of the Christian identity was something that the fourth century *received* and continued to expand upon through its biblical exegesis and liturgical life as reflected in the credal Tradition."{16}

Consider what came out of the period of Constantine's reign. Says Williams:

> *I am claiming the late patristic period functioned as a kind of doctrinal canon by which all subsequent developments of theology were measured up to the present day. The great creeds of the period, the development of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the finalization of the biblical canon, doctrines pertaining to the human soul and being made in the image of God, to the fall and redemption, to justification by faith, and so on, find their first and (in many cases) enduring foothold in this period. All theological steps later taken, in confirmation or denial, will begin on the trail marked by the early Fathers. . . . The theology that developed after Constantine was not a movement radically subversive to Scripture and to the apostolic faith. On the contrary, the major creeds and doctrinal deliberations were a conscious extension of the earlier Tradition and teaching of the New Testament while attempting, in light new challenges,*

to articulate a Christian understanding of God and salvation.{17}

The reason this is significant for our study is that some have let the idea that the church fell in the late patristic era cause them to discount the entire era. This is a mistake. There was good and bad for the church under Constantine's reign. Nonetheless, the church continued to develop in its understanding of the apostolic Tradition. We shouldn't ignore the early church because of occasional failings.

Tradition and Roman Catholicism

Because we so often associate tradition with the Catholic Church, it is very likely that the reader is wondering how this understanding of tradition differs from that taught by the Roman Church. Before beginning our look at tradition, then, let's distinguish what we're talking about from that which is held by the Roman Church.

In the first few centuries after Christ, oral and written tradition was thought of as being the same thing. The "canon" was acknowledged in either form. By the 4th and 5th centuries tradition and Scripture were distinguished more carefully, but still were seen as being of one piece. In the 14th century, however, tradition became a separate *source* of truth when it was realized that some traditions couldn't be proved from Scripture.{18} There were now, then, *two* sources of revelation—Scripture and Church—tradition, rather than *one* source in two forms. What the Reformers wanted to do was not to pit Scripture against tradition *per se* and throw out the latter. They wanted to let go of man-made traditions and go back to the true apostolic tradition. "The sixteenth-century Reformers were cognizant of this distinction and highly valued the Tradition located in the Fathers as a means of interpreting biblical truth. . . . The Reformation was not

about Scripture versus tradition but about reclaiming the ancient Tradition against distortions of that Tradition, or what eventually became a conflict of Tradition versus traditions."{19} They wanted to avoid citing the church fathers as authorities for doctrines or practices, which were incongruent with Scripture. They rejected the idea that the ancient Tradition had become secondary to the traditions of medieval Catholicism. Tradition with a small "t" had begun to interpret Tradition with a capital "T"; the Reformers thus emphasized Scripture as delivering true apostolic Tradition to argue against Rome's claim to authority.

While some branches of the Reformation retained some of the old traditions, others didn't. The former wanted to be sure Scripture didn't *oppose* them; the latter wanted to know if a tradition or belief was actually *taught* in Scripture. Man-devised traditions were to be set aside. This is the more dominant approach taken by the Free Church tradition.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on Scripture along with a suspicion of traditions in general worked together to produce an anti-traditional attitude that was unnecessary, and which has cut-off much of the church's past from Christians today.

Apostolic Tradition

Tradition and Traditionalism

The Greek word that is translated *tradition (paradosis)* "means a transmission from one party to another, an exchange of some sort, implying living subjects." It involves the idea of receiving and passing on. Williams notes that tradition is "not something *dead* handed *down,* but *living* being *handed over*."{20} It is as much a noun as a verb, meaning "that which is handed over" as well as "the process of handing it over."

Note, too, that tradition isn't necessarily something old. As one scholar writes, "The scriptural use of the term *tradition*

has nothing to do with oldness or with a practice or beliefs being time-honored. A tradition, in the strict sense of the word, becomes tradition the instant it is handed over."{21}

This kind of tradition isn't to be confused with "traditionalism," which refers to faith in tradition *per se*. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan contrasts the two this way: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."{22}

We often think of traditions as being *practices,* such as decorating a church a certain way during certain seasons, or conducting worship services certain ways. But traditions can be teachings—beliefs passed from one person to another. Paul referred to his teachings as traditions. He exhorts the Thessalonians: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6, *NASB*. The *NIV* translates the word "tradition" as "teaching.") Paul's job was to pass on what he had been taught so those who heard could pass it on themselves. This idea is expressed clearly in his letter to Timothy, where he said, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Tim 2:2)

Someone might object, pointing out that Jesus speaks only negatively about tradition. "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men," He says. (Mark 7:8) But notice: Jesus is chastising the Pharisees, not for holding to traditions *per se*, but for letting the traditions of *men* trump the things of God.

Apostolic Tradition

The traditions that Paul passed on included three parts: the *kerygmatic* part, which was the core teaching of Christ (e.g.,

I Cor. 15); the *ecclesiastical* part, which dealt with matters of practice in the church (e.g., I Cor. 11); and the *ethical* part, which taught people how to live upright lives (e.g., II Thess. 3:6). Together, all this was simply called the Tradition (Williams and others capitalize the word to distinguish it from the individual traditions of churches that often distinguish them.{23}). "The Tradition indicates the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly."{24}

The Tradition, then, was the substance of the Gospel message passed on from one person to the next. "Tradition was an expression of the original apostolic preaching," says Daniel Williams. It was not "an extracanonical source of revelation . . . but a summary of the essential content of faith to which the Scripture, Old and New Testaments, testifies."{25}

Apostolic Tradition was transmitted through "baptismal professions, credal-like formulas, and hymns. Such vehicles were the primary means by which Christian teaching and spirituality was conveyed to believers."{26} The Tradition was also conveyed to the church in the writings that make up our New Testament. These, of course, were not an afterthought; they provided a fixed source of truth for God's people and eventually became the church's ultimate authority.

The Rule of Faith

The doctrinal core of the Tradition came to be known as the Rule of Faith. This was the "summary of the main points of Christian teaching." It referred "to the apostolic preaching that served as the norm of Christian faith."{27} "Those elements of what the church believed (*fides quae creditur*), a kind of 'mere Christianity,'" says Williams, "are discovered in the *regula fidei* or Rule of faith."{28} The Rule was widely recognized by middle to late second century, and universally recognized by the early third century.{29}

Although there was no set form for the Rule of Faith, which makes it distinct from creeds, "the essential message," says Everett Ferguson, "was fixed by the facts of the gospel and the structure of Christian belief in one God, reception of salvation in Christ, and experience of the Holy Spirit; but each teacher had his own way of stating or elaborating these points."{30}

Here is perhaps the fullest expression of the Rule, found in the writings of Tertullian.

> *Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.{31}*

The Rule of Faith served a few important functions. It

provided a summary of the faith for new converts preparing for baptism.{32} It also was used to counter the heresies such as those of the Marcionites and the gnostics. Marcion's understanding of Paul's doctrine of grace hindered him from accepting the Old Testament God as the Father of Jesus. This rejection was reflected in his treatment of the New Testament. He only accepted Luke and Paul's writings, and altered even those to suit his beliefs. Marcion believed that only those would be saved who accepted his teachings. Gnostic beliefs, which had to be answered, were that Jesus hadn't come in the flesh, or that the Christ had simply borrowed the human body of Jesus in the incarnation. Salvation was obtained by obtaining certain secret knowledge. The Rule was used as a response to such beliefs. It stood as a known oral tradition against the gnostics' secret traditions.

Since even these opponents of apostolic Christianity appealed to the Bible for support, appeal was made to the Rule of Faith for the proper interpretation of authentic Scripture. Says William DiPuccio,

> *The Rule served as a canon within a canon, enabling the Fathers to ascertain the correct interpretation of the Bible in fundamental matters of faith, and as a yardstick for measuring the canonicity of a particular writing. . . . The Rule was regarded, then, as the lens or reference grid through which the Scriptures were interpreted. Clement of Alexandria makes this distinction when he declares that the first principle of his system is the Scriptures as they are rightly interpreted through the church's Rule of Faith.{33}*

As a canon of interpretation, it served as the "plumbline of the truth." Without such a plumbline, "scriptural exegesis is left to the discretion of the individual interpreter or school of interpretation."{34}

Scripture, Tradition, and the Church

In the evangelical church, Scripture and tradition are typically set in opposition to one another. But in the early church the two worked together as two forms of the same message. As one writer notes, "It is not a question of whether Scripture *or* tradition has the primacy; nor is it even a question of Scripture *and* tradition; rather, it is more properly a question of *scriptural tradition*."{35}

At first, it was the oral Tradition or teachings of the apostles which was authoritative in the churches, because that was what people received. As the apostles' writings became available, they were accepted as authoritative because they were recognized as mirroring the Rule of Faith.{36} In the early church, Scripture and the Rule were never placed in opposition to one another; they taught the same thing.{37} These three—Scripture, Tradition, and the church—were considered one collective source for the truth of Christ. The Bible was to be interpreted by the church in keeping with the Tradition.{38} "Dividing Scripture from the Tradition or from the church," says Williams, "creates an artificial distinction which would have been completely alien to the earliest generations of Christians."{39}

It's important to note, too, that the Tradition was never held above Scripture.{40} The two worked together. "The Rule, then, is co-extensive with the Bible, but it is not above it," says William DiPuccio. "It provides the *optics* we need to bring the Bible into focus."{41}

One might ask, however, why the Rule *itself* was accepted as authoritative in the early church. Wouldn't oral tradition by its nature be subject to contamination? What guaranteed it was *apostolic succession*. "Setting aside later alterations and/or distortions of this idea," DiPuccio says, "the original concept of apostolic succession (which included deacons or presbyters as well as bishops) was not so much a succession of

ordination, as a succession of living *faith and truth* as these are embodied in the Scriptures and the ancient Rule of Faith."{42} Everett Ferguson gives us the thinking of Irenaeus on the matter:

> *A person could go to the churches founded by the apostles . . . and determine what was taught in those churches by the succession of teachers since the days of the apostles. In other words, the apostles taught those they ordained to lead the churches, and then these passed on to others what they had been taught. The constancy of this teaching was guaranteed by its public nature; a change could have been detected, since the teaching was open. The accuracy of the teaching in each church was confirmed by its agreement with what was taught in other churches. One and the same faith had been taught in all the churches since the time of the apostles.{43}*

Significance of the Tradition for Today

Does this issue carry any significance beyond historical information? Should the Rule of Faith have any meaning for us today? I think it does. First, it opens to us the teachings of the church fathers, providing a wonderful resource for understanding our faith. Once we recognize that the church didn't fall so precipitously in the patristic era and following, we can look to the church of earlier times for understanding and inspiration.

Second, by looking at the core message taught in the early church we can be reminded of the central truths of Christianity, which will give us a basis for evaluating doctrinal teachings today. Paul warned Timothy of the destruction caused by false teachings, and encouraged him to remember his teaching and to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." (II Tim. 3:14) What Prof. Christopher Hall says makes sense: "The hermeneutical

and historical proximity of the fathers to the New Testament church and its apostolic tradition demands that we listen carefully to their exegetical insights, advice and intuitions."{44}

Third, by seeing what is most important we can work to correct the disunity in the church. Think about what separates Christians in America. Right now worship style is a major issue. Ideas about end times and modes of baptism are two other divisive issues. When we think about our differences, however, do we stop to think about our similarities? Do we even *know* what people of other Christian traditions believe? We shouldn't minimize significant differences between churches. But by keeping our lines so carefully drawn, are we dishonoring our Lord who prayed for unity among His people? (Jn. 17:20-23) Maybe a look back will remind us of what is most important and around which we can unite. We can begin to break down the walls constructed by our differences over matters which aren't so clear or which aren't as important as the central truths. Without taking hold of the Tradition flowing from the apostles into and through the early church, Williams believes we will see an increasing sectarianism "characterized by an ahistoricism and spiritual subjectivism," and we will be more susceptible to accommodation to the world.{45}

Fourth, we can be re-connected with the church of the past. Simply knowing about the history of the church gives us a sense of being part of something big; something that stretches beyond the world we see. It lifts us out of our provincialism, thus expanding our understanding of God and His ways with His church.

Finally, we will see even more clearly how down to earth our faith is. We can see how it moved with the ebb and flow of real life as regular people (like you and me) did their best amid trying circumstances to understand and live out the faith.

Conclusion

By reopening the church's past we will find a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom which can serve us well today. By learning about the early church and church fathers one will be both encouraged and challenged. Both are important for a vital faith.

There are a number of resources available for those who are interested in probing the minds of those who have gone before us. Daniel Williams' *Retrieving the Tradition,* Christopher Hall's *Reading the Scripture With the Church Fathers*, or Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*{46} are excellent places to start.

Notes

1. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition, and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
2. Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition" in James S. Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 80.
3. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 128. See also Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation," 80.
4. Williams, 18.
5. Cf. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 24.
6. Hall, 25.
7. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Hall, 25.
8. Hall, 25-26. Cf. Williams, 22.

9. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 127, quoted in Hall, 26.
10. Williams, 2-3.
11. Williams, chap. 6, 173ff.
12. A. J. Conyers, "Protestant Principle, Catholic Substance," *First Things* 67 (November 1996): 17, quoted in Williams, 15.
13. Williams, 5.
14. Williams, 13.
15. Williams deals with this at length in *Retrieving the Tradition*, especially pp. 101-131.
16. Williams, 130.
17. Williams, 139.
18. Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Tradition" by J. Van Engen. See also Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 96.
19. Williams, 175.
20. Williams, 35.
21. Father Andrew, "A Response to Harold O.J. Brown" in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 201, n. 2.
22. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, "The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition" (100-600), (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 9.
23. Williams, 36.
24. Williams, 6.
25. Williams, 97.
26. Williams, 68-69.
27. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), s.v. "Rule of Faith," by Ferguson, 1003.
28. Williams, 92.
29. William DiPuccio, (1995). "Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and the Rule of Faith: An Ancient Key to a Modern Question," *Premise II* (9), 5ff. capo.org/premise/95/oct/p950905.html.
30. Ferguson, "Rule of Faith," 1004.
31. Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics" Chap. 13,

The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 3, 448-449, The AGES Digital Library Collections.
32. Ferguson, “Rule,” 1004.
33. DiPuccio. See also Williams, 97-98.
34. Williams, 99.
35. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 19990, s.v. “Tradition,” by Donald F. Winslow, 908, quoted in DiPuccio. One can see the organic unity of the oral and written traditions by noting that both were called canon, first the Tradition, and later the Scriptures. Cf. R.P.C. *Hanson, Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 78-79, and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1988), 77.
36. Williams, 45.
37. “Tertullian clearly states that the Rule is identical to Scripture in content, though not in form.” DiPuccio.
38. Williams, 97-98. See also DiPuccio.
39. Williams, 14.
40. Williams, 96-97.
41. DiPuccio.
42. DiPuccio.
43. DiPuccio.
44. Hall, 196.
45. Williams, 14.
46. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. This is a reworking of his earlier Common Roots cited above.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

Modern Myths

Myths and Modern Myths

Have you ever heard someone describe the Bible as *myth*? All those supernatural occurrences couldn't possibly have taken place, it is said. It's a good story, intended to help people lead a good life and perhaps get closer to God (if there is one), but not to be taken literally.

What is a *myth*? A myth is a story that serves to provide meaning and structure for life. It *might* have some history behind it, but that isn't important. It is the ideas that count. Myths are intended to translate the supposed abstract realities of the world in concrete, story form.

Myths were important to the ancient Greeks for defining who they were and what the world was like. In modern times, however, we try to de-emphasize the significance of myths for a culture; we equate *myth* with *fiction*, and fiction isn't to be taken seriously.

In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*,{1} Philip Sampson debunks the notion that we've given up myths, even in the arena of science! According to Sampson there are a number of myths that have become significant for our culture even though they are false—or at least misleading—with respect to the facts. In this book, Sampson gives the true stories behind some of the myths our culture holds as true, such as the idea that Galileo's fight with the church provides a good example of the supposed warfare between science and religion.

Myths such as these serve to perpetuate certain notions their promoters want us to believe. They can develop over time with no conscious aim, or they can be knowingly advanced for the good of a certain cause. So, as with the Galileo story, if one

wishes to advance the notion that there is a tension between Christianity and science, with science being clearly in the right, one might employ a story which pits the knowledgeable, good scientist just out to present facts against the hierarchy of a church which seeks to keep people in darkness so as to advance its own cause.

In ancient Greece, myths weren't told as though they were historically true. In our society, however, facts are important, so myths are told as if they are scientifically or historically accurate. Thus, with the Galileo story, there is enough history to seem to give it a factual basis—although significant facts are left out!

In this article we will look at three of these modern myths: Galileo and the church, the purported oppression of people by missionaries, and the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Galileo and the Church

One myth that is deeply ingrained in our culture is that of the supposed "warfare between science and religion." Science deals with fact; religion deals with nice stories, at best. Whenever there is a conflict, obviously science wins the day. This myth goes deeper than just who has the best interpretation of the data. It's as if there is, *of necessity,* a conflict between the two, and religion has to be shown to be inferior to science.

One story that seems to serve this myth especially well is the story of Galileo. You've probably heard about Galileo's celebrated battle with the church over his views on the nature of the universe. As the story is typically told, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo, who agreed that the earth was not the center of the universe after all, then developed his work. Supposedly the church wanted to keep man at the center of God's creation and thus as

the supreme part of the created order. To move earth out of the center was to somehow lower man. Thus, the church persecuted Galileo and eventually silenced him, showing its raw power over society.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Galileo was a martyr, and his persecutors incorrigible ignoramuses."{2} Says writer Patrick Moore, "The Roman Catholic Church attacked Galileo because the [heliocentric] theory was not reconcilable with certain passages of the Bible. As a consequence, poor Galileo spent most of his life in open conflict with the Church."{3} However, reason ultimately prevailed and science won the day over religious obscurantism.

The problem with this story is that it ranges from the true to the distorted to the blatantly untrue! Galileo's primary trouble was with *secular scientists*, not with the church. It was when he began reinterpreting Scripture to promote his cause and publicly ridiculed the pope that he got into big trouble.

"The Galileo story was developed by French Enlightenment thinkers as part of their anticlerical program," says Philip Sampson, "but by the late nineteenth century it had created a language of warfare between science and religion." Science became the fount of reasoned knowledge, and religion was "reduced to ignorance and dogma."{4} To accomplish this, however, history had to be distorted.

Let's see what really happened with Galileo. It needs to be noted up front that in Galileo's day the theories of scientists were not thought to give an actual account of the way the heavens worked; they simply provided models for ordering the data. They "were regarded as the play things of virtuosi," as George Sim Johnston put it.{5} "To the Greek and medieval mind, science was a kind of formalism, a means of coordinating data, which had no bearing on the ultimate reality of things."{6}

The fact is that the church didn't *care* all that much about what Copernicus and Galileo thought about the order of the universe, scientifically speaking. Copernicus' book on the subject circulated for seventy years without any trouble at all. It was the *scientists* of the day who opposed the theory, because it went against the received wisdom of Aristotle. Copernicus believed that his theory actually described the universe the way it was, and this was unacceptable to the academics. When Galileo published his ideas, it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

According to Aristotle, the earth was at the center of the universe, and all the rest of the universe was situated in concentric spheres around it. From the moon out, all was thought to be perfect and unchanging. The earth, however, was obviously changing and thus imperfect. All matter in the universe was thought to fall downward toward the center of the earth. The earth is therefore like the trash bin of the universe; it was no compliment to man to emphasize his place on earth. In other words, to be at the center of the universe was *not* a good thing!

To now say that the earth was out with other planets where things had to be perfect was to seriously undercut Aristotle's ideas. So when Galileo published his notions it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

It's true that Galileo got into hot water with the church, but it was *not* because his theory moved man physically from the center of the universe; that was a *good* thing, given Aristotle's views. Man was already considered small in the universe. Most people already believed that the earth was created for God, not for man. "The doctrine that the earth exists for man's use," says Philip Sampson, "derives from Greek philosophy, not the Bible."{7} Thus, the Copernican theory "ennobled" the status of the earth by making it a planet. So the church in general didn't see the heliocentric theory as a demotion.

The fact is that Galileo was on good terms with the church for a long time, even while advancing his theory. He made sure that the idea he was attacking of the incorruptibility of the universe with its perfect heavens and imperfect earth was an Aristotelian belief and not a doctrine of the church. "Indeed," says Sampson, "the church largely accepted his conclusions, although the die-hard Aristotelians in the universities did not. . . . Far from being constantly harried by obscurantist priests, he was feted by cardinals, received by Pope Paul V and befriended by the future Pope Urban VIII."{8} As historian George Santillana wrote in 1958, "It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular circles."{9} He wasn't afraid of the church; he feared the ridicule of his fellow scientists!

What *did* get Galileo in trouble with the church were two things. First, because the church had historically followed Aristotle (as did secularists) in interpreting scientific data, it wanted hard evidence to support Galileo's views, which he did not have. For Galileo to insist that his theory was true to the way things really were was to step outside proper scientific boundaries. He simply didn't have enough hard data to make such a claim. The problem, then, wasn't between religion and science, but between methods of interpreting the data. But this, in itself, wasn't enough to bring the church down on him.

The bigger problem was Galileo's manner of promoting his beliefs. To do so, he reinterpreted Scripture in contradiction to traditional understandings, which ran counter to the dictates of the Council of Trent. Perhaps even worse was his mockery of the pope. His treatise, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems,* took the form of a debate. The character that took Aristotle's view against the heliocentric theory was called Simplicio. His "role in the dialogue is to be a kind of

Aunt Sally to be knocked down by Galileo. . . .Galileo puts into Simplicio's mouth a favorite argument used by his friend Pope Urban VIII and then mocks it. In other words, he concluded his treatise by effectively calling the very pope who had befriended him a simpleton for not agreeing with Galileo. This was not a wise move," says Sampson, "and the rest is history."{10} In fact, Galileo himself believed that the major cause of his trouble was the charge that he had made fun of the pope, *not* that he thought the earth moved.

So the condemnation of Galileo did *not* result from some basic conflict between science and religion. It "was the result of the complex interplay of untoward political circumstances, political ambitions, and wounded prides."{11} However, the myth continues to bolster the status of secular, naturalistic thought by making religion look bad.

So is there warfare between science and religion? Hardly. This is really warfare between worldviews.

The Missionaries

A favorite charge against Christians for many years is the belief that missionaries effectively destroyed other cultures: running roughshod over the natives' beliefs and culture. Like the myth of the warfare between science and religion, the myth of the oppressive missionary provides a vehicle for exalting secularism while denigrating Christianity. According to this myth, the Christian missionary arrogantly strips natives of their own culture and forces western Christian culture on them, even to the point of oppression and exploitation.

Secular literature often leaves one with an impression of missionaries as stern, joyless oppressors who took advantage of innocent natives in order to advance their own ends. They forced their art and music on other cultures, made the people learn the missionaries' language, and manipulated them to wear western clothing. "Missionaries are accused of exploiting

natives for commercial gain," says Sampson, "colluding with expansionist colonialism and even committing 'ethnocide.' They are implicated in the theft of land, the forced removal of children from their parents, the destruction of habitats, torture, murder, the decline of whole populations into destitution, alcoholism, and prostitution. Even when they provide disaster relief, they are guilty of 'buying' converts."{12} There are no "half tones," says Sampson. Missionaries "impose rigid, joyless, and patriarchal rules" on natives who are "portrayed as residents in an idyllic land, the victims of the full might of Western oppression incarnate in the person of 'the missionary.'"{13}

One of the problems in this assessment is the ready identification of missionary activity with that of western colonialism and trade. While missionaries often *did* import their culture along with the Gospel, they were not, for the most part, interested in taking over other peoples. Colonialists, however, were. It was "the Enlightenment visions of 'civilization' and 'progress' that inspired colonial activity from the eighteenth century and rejected faith in God for faith in reason." Colonialists had no qualms about attempting to "civilize" the "barbarians" and "savages." *Civilized* was a term which "had 'behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development.'" Traders, also, were guilty of exploiting other peoples for their own profit. Consider the power of commercial enterprises such as the search for gold by the conquistadors and the activity of such organizations as the British South Africa Company that brought exploitation.{14}

What this reveals is the role of *modernism* in the oppression and exploitation of native peoples. Romanticism established the image of the "noble savage," the pure, pristine individual who, living close to nature, had not been corrupted by the influences of civilization. The fact is that some native

peoples were given to human sacrifice and cannibalism, among other vices. However, the myth of the noble savage took root in western thinking. Then Darwin taught that there were weaker races that were doomed to extinction by the unstoppable forces of evolutionary change (new ideas about eugenics grew out of this thinking). These two images—the noble savage and the weaker race—combined to paint a picture of vulnerable nobility. According to the myth, Christian missionaries were guilty of taking advantage of this vulnerability to advance their own causes. The reality was that it was often *colonialists* who exploited these people, and salved their consciences by picturing the people as doomed to extinction anyway.

By contrast, what one finds in the literature about missionary activities includes occasions where they stood against the colonial and trading powers. The Dominican bishop Bartolomè opposed slavery in the sixteenth century. John Philip of the London Missionary Society supported native rights in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Lancelot Threlkeld demanded "equal protection under the law for the Awabakal people of Australia."{15} John Eliot stood up for the Indians in Massachusetts' courts against unjust settler claims. Even one critic of missionary activity conceded that evangelical missions in Latin America "tended to treat native people with more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens."{16} Missionaries taught people to read their own languages, good hygiene to indigenous groups, farming skills, and even brought medical help. In some regards, the missionaries *did* try to change other cultures, and sometimes illegitimately. But sometimes that isn't wrong; there should be no apologies for trying to stop such practices as human sacrifice and cannibalism. Compare the efforts of contemporary secularists to end female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes.

Scholars have known for many years that the identification of

missions with oppression is unfair, yet the myth continues to be told. It simply isn't true that missionaries were responsible for the destruction of native cultures. But the myth persists, for "it provides the modern mind with an alibi for its own complicity in oppression."{17}

The Witch Trials

Some critics like to portray the Christian Church as the great persecutor of the weak and helpless. A popular vehicle for this myth is the story of the witch trials in Europe and America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Sampson says that this story "relates that many millions of women throughout Europe, mainly the elderly, poor and isolated, were tortured by the church into confessing nonexistent crimes before being burnt to death."{18} The story of the witch trials provides a handy illustration for the myth that that the church actively persecutes those who aren't in agreement. "The history of Christianity is the history of persecution," said one writer,{19} and this is seen in no bolder outline than in the story of the witch-hunts. Furthermore, this story provides a good example of the supposed women-hating attitude of the church since the vast majority of witches tried were women.

There is no denying that Christians were involved in the trial and execution of witches. But to paint this issue as simply a matter of the powerful church against the weakest members of society is to distort what really happened.

Before considering a couple of facts about the trials, the bias of the critics who write about them should be noted. For most, there simply is no such thing as a supernatural witch, meaning one who can actually draw on satanic power to manipulate nature. If this is true, it *must* be the case that there is some natural explanation for the strange behavior of those charged with witchcraft, and the church was completely unjustified in prosecuting them. But this is a naturalistic

bias; it ignores the fact that “most people of the world throughout most of its history have taken supernatural witchcraft to be real.”{20} Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris, “the prejudice of ‘indignant rationalists’ [who were] more concerned to castigate the witch-baiters for their credulity and cruelty than to understand what the phenomenon was all about.”{21} It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”{22}

This leads us to ask who and why these charges of witchcraft were brought in the first place. What we find is that this “was not principally a church matter, nor was the Inquisition the prime mover in the prosecution of witches,” as is often thought. It was ordinary lay people who typically brought charges of witchcraft, and mostly women at that!{23} The primary reasons were not bizarre supernatural behavior or heretical beliefs, but the tensions brought about by a loss of crops or the failure of bread to rise. “People commonly appealed to magic and witchcraft to explain tragedies and misfortunes, or more generally to gain power over neighbors.”{24} Even kings and queens saw witchcraft as a very real threat to their thrones and well-being. The Inquisition actually supplied a tempering influence. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said, “In general, the established church was opposed to the persecution” of witches.{25} Likewise, the Protestant churches were not the real aggressors in the witch trials. John Calvin believed that witchcraft was a delusion, the cure for which was the Gospel, not execution.{26}

Estimates of executions in the millions are grossly exaggerated. Recent studies estimate about 150300 per year, making a total of between 40,000 and 100,000 who were executed over a period of 300 years. While “this is an appalling enough catalog of human suffering,” as Sampson says,{27} it pales in

comparison to the slaughter of innocent people in the 20th century, resulting from the excesses of modernistic thinking. "Genocide is an invention of the modern world," says one writer.{28} Compare the numbers slaughtered under Nazism or Stalinism to that of the witch trials. If the witch trials demonstrate the danger of religion to society, the slaughters under Hitler and Stalin demonstrate the much greater danger of irreligion.

Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris. It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of "Enlightenment overcoming superstition."{29}

Conclusion

From the days of the early church we have been called upon to defend not only our beliefs but also the *activities* of individual Christians and the church as a whole. In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization,* Philip Sampson has given us a tool to better enable us to do that today. I encourage you to read it.

Notes

1. Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

2. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), 17, quoted in Sampson, 28.

3. Patrick Moore, *A Beginner's Guide to Astronomy* (London: PRC Publishing, 1997), 12, quoted in Sampson, 28.

4. Sampson, 45.

5. George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," downloaded from

http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html May 7, 2001.

6. Ibid.

7. Sampson, 34.

8. Sampson, 36-37.

9. George de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (London: Heinemann, 1958), xii, quoted in Sampson, 37.

10. Sampson, 38.

11. William R. Shea, “Galileo and the Church” in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 312, quoted in Sampson, 39.

12. Sampson, 93.

13. Sampson, 94.

14. Sampson, 94.

15. Sampson, 97-98.

16. D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990), 12, quoted in Sampson, 98.

17. Sampson, 99.

18. Sampson, 130.

19. Laurie, Cabot, *Power of the Witch* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1992), 62, quoted in Sampson, 130.

20. Sampson, 133.

21. Sampson, 144.

22. Sampson, 133.

23. Sampson, 134-135.

24. Sampson, 134.

25. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), 37, quoted in Sampson, 139.

26. Sampson, 141.

27. Sampson 137.

28. Trevor-Roper, 22, quoted in Sampson, 137.

29. Sampson, 133.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

Confident Belief

Introduction

It's hard to imagine how any Christian at any time in history could live life completely free from any doubts about the truth of the faith. Suffering, inconsistent behavior among Christians, the lure of the world, intellectual misgivings—these things and others can lead us to question whether it's all true.

Since the days of the early church there have been objections to the gospel which have given pause to Christians. Can I really believe this? *Should* I believe this? Doubt is part of human experience, and Christians experience it no less than

non-Christians. Doubts about our faith are more momentous than many we deal with, however, because of their implications. I have my doubts about whether my favorite football team will be in the Super Bowl, but I can still hang in there with them as a fan. The claims of Christ are much more momentous, however. Our individual destinies and more are at stake.

We find ourselves today in the West beset by two different schools of thought which can cause us to doubt. On the one hand are the modernists, heirs of the Enlightenment, who believe that reason is sufficient for true knowledge and that Christianity just doesn't measure up to sound reason. On the other hand are postmodernists who don't believe anyone can know what is true, and are astonished that we dare lay claim to having *the* truth about ultimate reality.

I'd like to look at these two mindsets to see if they have legitimate claims. The goal is to see if either should be allowed to rob us of our confidence.

Modernism and Certain Knowledge

Modernists believe that our reason is sufficient to know truth, in fact the *only* reliable means of attaining knowledge. Only that which can be scientifically measured and quantified and reasoned through logically can constitute true knowledge.

What does this say, however, about things that *can't* be so measured, things such as beauty, morals, and matters of the spirit? Can we not have knowledge of such things? We have inherited the belief that such things are at best matters of opinion; they are subjective matters having to do only with the individual's experiences and tastes.

This way of thinking is disastrous for religious beliefs of almost any kind. Christianity in particular makes claims that can't be weighed or counted or measured (although there *are* elements which *can* be empirically tested): the nature of God, justification by faith, the deity of Christ, and the reality

of the Holy Spirit are a few examples. Since these elements are central but don't fit within our logical, scientific mindset, they are said to be matters of personal opinion at best, or figments of our imagination at worst.

The matter of the "knowability" of the faith is a problem for nonbelievers, but it can be a worse problem for believers. Those whom Daniel Taylor calls "reflective Christians" often find themselves betrayed by their own doubts; they feel the weight of providing for themselves the kind of evidences a nonbeliever might demand and feel guilty when they cannot produce in their own minds a logical certainty for their beliefs.{1} What such a believer typically does is continue to mount up evidence and arguments and think and talk and think some more and hope that one day either the missing link will come clear or he will be able to "call off thoughts awhile," in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.{2}

Postmodern Skepticism

Times are changing, though, and the problem Christians face more and more is the challenge coming from the other end of the spectrum. If modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge at all. While on the one hand modernists say there is not enough evidence to trust our beliefs, on the other hand postmodernists tell us our evidences mean nothing regarding the truth value of our faith.

Postmodernists believe that truth is a construct of our own imagination and desires. They believe there is no single, unifying account of reality that covers everything, one *metanarrative* as they call it. They believe one must leave everything an open question, that one shouldn't settle anywhere since there is no way to know ultimate truths at all. Our own realities are created for us partly by our society and partly by our own exercise of power, often by the very words we use.

Is the Christian, then, now to think of her faith as just that? *Her* faith? Something that has validity for *her* and her *group* but not necessarily for everyone? This kind of thinking fosters religious pluralism, the belief that truth is found in many different religions. This is disastrous for Christianity for it leaves us wondering why we should hold to these beliefs when others might be more attractive.

Thus, there is on the one hand the modernist who thinks we can know everything we need to know using our reason, and on the other the postmodernist who thinks the search for knowledge is a waste of time. In the face of these mindsets, what should we do? Should we resign ourselves to feeling guilty and maybe a little intellectually perverse because we can't assign mathematical certainty to our beliefs? Or do we swallow the skepticism of postmodernists and just hold our beliefs as the creations of our own minds and wills? It is my contention that we needn't be bound by either position on truth and knowledge, but that we can have knowledgeable confidence in the truth of the faith.

Modernism: The Enlightenment Search for Knowledge

Modernity was the era which had its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which continued until recent years. Although postmodernism seems to be the order of the day, one worldview doesn't come to a screeching halt one day and another pick up the next. Thus, there are still many people who view life in modernist terms.

Modernists believe that reason is the only truly reliable source of knowledge. Revelation is set aside. Since reason is the authority, only that which has logical or mathematical certainty can be accepted as true knowledge. Anything less can only have some level of probability. The attacks of empiricists such as David Hume apparently rendered

Christianity highly *im*probable.

Lesslie Newbigin argues that this demand for indubitable knowledge gave rise to the skepticism of our day. In fact, postmodern skepticism is a sharp rejection of Enlightenment thought.

Let's look briefly at the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge.

René Descartes and the Search for Certainty

In response to the skepticism of the 17th century, mathematician/philosopher René Descartes accepted the challenge of providing an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt.{3} Descartes's approach was to use the tool of the skeptics—which is *doubt*—as his starting point. He threw out everything that couldn't be known indubitably, and was left with one idea which he couldn't doubt: I think, therefore I am. He developed his philosophy from this starting point.

Two important points are to be made about Descartes's method. First, he made the break from starting with God as the measure of all things to starting with the individual person. Human reason was now the supreme arbiter of truth.{4} Second, Descartes established doubt as a principle of knowledge.{5} In modern times, critical thinking doubts everything until it is proved true.

On this basis, Western man devoted himself to knowing as much as he could about his world without any reference to God, and with the idea that knowledge had to be logically or mathematically certain. Knowledge is quantifiable; one must strip away anything other than brute, objective facts which can be weighed, counted, or measured or deduced from facts which can be so quantified. Knowledge was to be objective, certain, and dispassionate—not subject to personal feelings or values or faith commitments. As theologian Stanley Grenz says, "The new tools of research included precise methods of

measurement and a dependence on mathematical logic. In turning to this method, Enlightenment investigators narrowed their focus of interest—and hence began to treat as real only those aspects of the universe that are measurable."{6}

On the heels of Descartes came Isaac Newton who gave us a vision of the cosmos as being an orderly machine, an idea in keeping with the rationalism of Descartes. The universe could be understood once its laws were understood. Although Descartes and Newton believed their ideas gave support to their Christian beliefs, they were subsequently used for just the opposite. "The modern world turned out to be Newton's mechanistic universe populated by Descartes's autonomous, rational substance," says Grenz. "In such a world, theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist."{7}

Was Descartes's method significant in Western History? Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.{8} In time, this approach was applied to other disciplines as well, from politics to ethics to theology. "In this way," says Grenz, "all fields of the human endeavor became, in effect, branches of natural science."{9}

Time has proved the value of scientific and mathematical reasoning. We all enjoy the benefits of technology. This being the case, however, why is it that we at the turn of the century find ourselves so skeptical? What has happened to the confidence modern man had in his ability to know?

Postmodernism: The Rejection of the Enlightenment Idea

With the acceptance of René Descartes's idea that truth was to be found ultimately in reason, and that the starting point for knowledge was doubt, the die was cast for the period of

history we call modernity. Using just his reason, and denying anything which wasn't certain, the individual could come to true knowledge with no reference to God.

But skeptical attacks continued through such philosophers as David Hume. In response, Immanuel Kant formulated a new understanding of knowledge. He believed that knowledge came from data received by the senses which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of our own minds. Thus, the structure of our own minds became a crucial component of the known world. With Kant, the thinking individual was now firmly established as the final authority for truth. Even with this, however, Kant still believed there *is* a reality external to us, and that all our minds work the same way to understand it.

Although Kant believed that we could truly know the world around us, his ideas pushed us a significant step *away* from that reality. He believed that we are thus incapable of knowing things as they are *in themselves*; we only know things as they *appear* to us. Thus, since God doesn't appear to us empirically, we do not have real knowledge of Him. Philosophers following him began to pick away at his ideas. Johann Fichte, for example, accepted Kant's ideas for the most part, but denied the idea that there *are* things-in-themselves; in other words, that there is something to reality apart from our perceptions of it. What we perceive is what is there. Now the way was made clear to think in terms of "alternative conceptual frameworks." There could now be multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

Nietzsche

Other philosophers picked away at Kant as well, but we'll only consider one more, the man who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy,"{10} Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a true foe of modernism. He believed the whole project of building up these "great edifices of ideas"{11} was

fundamentally flawed. Our attempts to abstract general knowledge from the particulars around us only results in distortion, he thought. He argued that "what we commonly accept as human knowledge is in fact merely a self-contained set of illusions. He essentially viewed 'truth' as a function of the language we employ and hence believed that truth 'exists' only within specific linguistic contexts."{12} Our world is only a construction of our own perspective, an aesthetic creation. And it has its roots in the will to power, "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external." Thus, "Motivated by the will to power," he thought, "we devise metaphysical concepts—conceptions of 'truth'—that advance the cause of a certain species or people."{13}

This is the heart of postmodern thought, and it surrounds us today. We cannot know the truth about reality; we only know our own constructions of it. We can hope to convince others to join us in our beliefs, but there is no room for rational argumentation, because one's views about the world are no better or worse than any others. As Stanley Grenz says, "all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are equally valid because all are equally invalid."{14} No one can really know, so believe what you want. But in attacking the possibility of knowing truth, postmodernism has cut off the limb upon which it sits. One writer has noted that postmodernism has destroyed itself. "It has deconstructed its entire universe. So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern."{15}

These, then, are the primary choices our society offers for considering the truth value of Christianity. Either we can affirm the modernist attitude and be satisfied only with scientific or mathematical certainty, or with the postmodernist we can throw the whole truth thing out the

window.

Impossible Demands, Groundless Limitations: A Critique

When challenged directly or indirectly by the world about the validity of our faith, what do we do? Do we continue to use modernistic ways of thinking to make a case for the faith, believing that we must provide logically certain proof? Or do we offer a postmodern, "true for me" argument relying on subjective matters which we use to persuade people to believe?{16} The answer lies in rejecting both the demands of modernism and the limitations of postmodernism.

Neither Mathematical Certainty . . .

In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that the modern approach was essentially wrong-headed, that it called for something which was unattainable.

With respect to the insistence on mathematical certainty, Newbigin notes first that this way of thinking takes us away from the real world rather than moving us closer to it. He says, "The certainty of mathematical propositions, as Einstein often observed, is strictly proportionate to their remoteness from reality."{17} For example, there is no such thing as a point as understood mathematically. Certainty belongs to the world of pure forms, not that of material things. "Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality," he says.{18}

Second, thinkers in the Romantic period argued that "mathematical reason could not do justice to the fullness of human experience." Such things as art and music and cultural traditions can't be mapped out mathematically.{19}

Third, the ambition of dealing with facts apart from values or

other non-factual biases is an impossible dream. We are never value-free in our thinking, even in the laboratory. As writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have shown (both of whom were scientists turned philosophers), what one studies and for what purpose, how one acts ethically in the lab and in the reporting of studies, what ones overall goals are for particular scientific work—all these reflect unproved value commitments; no one gives indubitable evidence for their validity. For all practical purposes it is impossible to remove such values held by faith.

In addition, I suggest that it isn't merely practically impossible to remove these faith/value commitments: it would be *wrong* to attempt to do so. One must always situate one's work in a framework of values to give it any significant meaning at all. Otherwise we are just acting, just doing things with no purpose to give coherence and direction.

Someone might object here that ones value commitments *can* be verified so as to render them no longer just faith commitments. To this Newbigin responds that faith is fundamental, even to doubt! For even doubt must rest on beliefs which are not themselves doubted. This is because one doubts something because it conflicts with something else one already believes. If that prior belief is also subjected to the test of doubt, it, too, can only be doubted because of something else one believes, and so on. Further, if one's doubt itself is based upon certain criteria of truth, then those criteria themselves must be believed. If they, too, are subjected to doubt, then the criteria for evaluating *them* must be believed to be true criteria, and so on again. Of course, one could simply doubt everything—in other words, become a skeptic. But no one can live consistently as a skeptic. To get in a car and drive on the highway indicates that one believes the brakes will work. And we expect people to have a basic understanding of some normative moral values. Newbigin sums up: "One does not learn anything except by believing

something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. . . . Rational doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa."{20}

It's important to realize, too, that the mathematical model simply doesn't apply across the board. Few areas of our lives are governed by such a high standard. Christianity isn't just a set of ideas to be logically constructed and evaluated. It is a Person relating to persons in particular historical contexts. We can place no stricter demands on this relationship regarding the certainty of knowledge than we do on the relationships we experience with people on earth in particular historical contexts.

On the plus side, we *do* have a significant body of evidence supporting our belief including historical evidences, rational arguments, and matters of the human experience such as the question of meaning—things which can't be quantified and thus find no place in modernistic thought. We also have no reason to adopt the reductionistic naturalism of modernism just on modernists' say so, but rather recognize the reality of and intrusion of the supernatural into our world.

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that the truth of Christianity doesn't rest on the fragility of human reason, although it is through our minds that we recognize its truth. It rests on the faithfulness of God who has made Himself known to us.{21} Our assurance comes from the combination of knowing, believing, and following the One who is true, not just from working out logical arguments.

Thus, we conclude that beliefs do *not* have to be indubitable to be held as true—in fact, very little of what we know has indubitable certainty—and unproved values form a necessary part of our knowledge. Modernists are not justified in requiring us to conform to their narrow standards for rationality.

. . . Nor Postmodern Skepticism

Although modernism was naïve in its expectations of reason, the reaction of postmodernism has been too severe.

In its reaction against modernism, postmodernism threw off the classical understanding of truth—namely, correspondence with reality. Having rejected the possibility of knowing what is real external to us, postmodernists have left us with only our own minds, wills, and words. Truth is the product of the creative activity of the individual.

But this clearly isn't the way we live. We assume that whenever we say something like, "It's raining outside," or even, "It's wrong to wantonly destroy the earth," we intend our words to reflect what really is the case.{22} Even the postmodernist will believe that injustice and oppression are wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Otherwise, how would we know that one act is morally acceptable and another unacceptable, even across cultures?{23} Thus, we reveal that we believe truth is there and accessible. Is there any reason to think that spiritual beliefs can't also correspond with reality? I can't think of any, *unless* one simply presupposes that spiritual realities can't be known.

What's more, we typically act as if we believe truth is *objective*, by which we mean that something really is the case apart from whether we believe it or not.{24} How can we meaningfully interact with the world around us if we don't think we can truly know it and not simply our individual or group construction of it?

Postmoderns' belief that there can be multiple and conflicting truths must be rejected also, for if truth is that which conforms to reality and reality itself cannot be contradictory, truth cannot be either. Either it is raining outside my window or it's not. It can't be doing both at the same time in the same location. Likewise, for example, either

God exists or He doesn’t. It can’t be both.

Against postmodernism, we hold that there is no reason to think there *can’t* be one explanation for all of reality *unless* one accepts a radical perspectivalism; i.e., that our beliefs are *only* our own perspectives and not reflections of reality itself. For the postmodernist to say this is to reveal that he assumes he has the inside scoop on ultimate reality which he claims no one has. This is therefore a faith commitment. Furthermore, there’s no reason to think we can’t know what the true explanation *is*, especially if the One who knows about it perfectly tells us.

Postmoderns also believe that truth is a construct of language. Because the meanings of words can vary, each linguistic group has its own truth. However, the fact that there are different words for the same thing doesn’t change the fact that the referent is the same. We don’t change the nature of something simply by changing the words we use for it. This is the weakness of what has been called “political correctness.” It is thought, it seems, that by using different words for something we thereby change the thing itself. While a change of terminology might change our *attitude* about something, it doesn’t change that something itself.

Thus, we reject the skepticism of postmodernity and confidently rest on the faith we hold as describing the way things really are.

We believe that there is no reason to accept postmodern skepticism. Skepticism is ultimately unlivable, and we needn’t spend our lives “playing with the pieces.” There is no reason in principle to assume we *can’t* know ultimate realities just because of our human limitations. It is arbitrary to simply decide God cannot reveal truth to us because of our limitations.

Further, there is no reason why there can’t be one explanation

of reality. The good news for postmodernists is that we *have* been met by the One who created the "story" of the world and is able to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. His is the one true explanation of reality. We deny that we are trapped behind our own perspectives, cut off from direct contact with reality,{25} and thus not able to "impose" truth on others. Truth is knowable and sharable.

Postmodernists believe that each person can only have his or her own "story" or life's situation, that each of us can only have his or her own little piece. We respond that we have a story that puts all the pieces together, a story which is coherent and consistent and which matches the nature of the needs of humanity. As we look around the world we see that we all are very much alike in our basic needs and aspirations. If there is such a thing as human nature and a human condition, it isn't unreasonable to think there could be one explanation of it.

Summary

Modernism served to produce doubts through its insistence upon certain knowledge, and postmodernism produces doubt through its insistence that no one can really know ultimate truths. Can we have confidence in the trustworthiness of our beliefs in the face of modernist and postmodernist ideas?

In response to doubts produced by modernism we look to Jesus, a historical Person who has revealed to us more than our reason is capable of discovering on its own. In response to doubts engendered by postmodernism, we look to Jesus the Creator of all and the final Word who has revealed to us ultimate truth. In him we find truth in its fullest sense, as the one who is real and trustworthy and who speaks. We can have confidence in our beliefs.

Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 18-19.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

4. Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 22-23, 227-28.

5. For this reason Descartes has been called the father of modern philosophy. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Descartes, Ren," by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

6. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66.

7. Ibid., 67. Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.

8. Ibid., 64.

9. Ibid., 67.

10. Ibid., 88.

11. Ibid., 89.

12. Ibid., 90.

13. Ibid., 92.

14. Ibid., 164,

15. Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of*

Postmodernism (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2000), 169.

16. There are some who believe we can put to use some of the perspectives of postmodernism, but it would take us too far afield of our subject to develop that now. For our purposes, I'm only concerned with the central skepticism of postmodernism.

17. Newbigin, 51.

18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 24, 25.

21. Ibid., 67.

22. For a recent study on truth in relation to postmodernism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay.*

23. Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 197-199.

24. Against modernism, however, we can affirm that believing in objective truth doesn't require that there be no non-provable elements involved in coming to know truth.

25. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 63.

© 2001 Probe Ministries.

Looking for God

Looking for God

> *If God had a name, what would it be?*
> *And would you call it to His face?*
> *If you were faced with Him in all His glory,*
> *What would you ask if you had just one question?*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*

God has made a comeback in pop music in recent years. In her song "One of Us," Joan Osborne wonders what we might ask God if we stood face-to-face with Him.{1} Writer Tom Beaudoin sees a spilled pitcher of milk in the music video for R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" as a symbol of the loss of religious authority in the lives of Gen-Xers.{2} Madonna's video for the song "Like a Prayer" is full of religious symbolism: an altar, a crucifix, candles, and other icons.{3}

Tom Beaudoin, a member of Generation X himself, says his generation is "strikingly religious." They express their spirituality through pop culture rather than through institutional religion.{4}The shift from the word *religion* to *spirituality* is significant here. Having lost confidence in institutional religion to provide satisfactory answers to important issues, Xers look elsewhere; often mixing ideas and religious expressions from a variety of sources as each person chooses for him or herself what to believe.

Beaudoin says Xers are on an "irreverent spiritual quest." Feeling abandoned by parents, churches, politicians, and even technology, they seek their own path in finding meaning for their lives. Campus minister Jimmy Long writes, "Xers are twice as likely as people in [the Boomer] generation to be children of divorce. Between 1960 and 1979 the American

divorce rate tripled." He continues, "Fifty percent of today's teenagers are not living with both birth parents."{5}

Looking outside the home, Xers feel let down as they look at what the Boomer generation left them.{6} They were alarmed by the TV movie *The Day After* that was about the results of nuclear war. The spaceship Challenger blew up shortly after takeoff; Watergate was fresh in our cultural memory; environmentalists were pointing to the severe damage to nature caused by technology. Xers thus see themselves as fixers, as those who have to clean up the mess preceding generations made. But since their own backgrounds were often so difficult, many simply hope to take charge of their own lives.

Finding little stability around them to give them any confidence that there is such a thing a objective truth which remains the same, and thus no ultimate truth which makes sense of everything, they feel the burden of providing their own meaning of life and establishing their own moral standards. Jimmy Long quotes Eric, a Gen-Xer who speaks of the stress this puts on him. "There's too much pressure from outside," he says.

> *"Life gets pretty complicated when you have to think carefully about everything you do, deciding for yourself whether it's right or wrong. In the end there can be so many conflicts going on inside of you that you can't do anything, it becomes impossible to be happy with what you think at any point."{7}*

As a result of all this, when they want to find their place in this world, Xers turn to friends. Their small communities of friends provide a structure for truth and meaning. Consensus means more with respect to "truth" than logic and facts.{8} "Busters process truth relationally rather than propositionally," say Celek and Zander.{9} The emphasis on community in Xer culture reveals their desire to get along,

not get ahead; to connect, not conquer.{10}

The modernistic search for utopia without invoking God has been turned on its head with the Buster generation. Their horizons and ambitions might be smaller than those of their parents, but they have an openness to the transcendent that their parents didn't have. Spirituality is now an accepted aspect of life; Xers are open to a sense of fellowship with something bigger than themselves.

In his collection of short stories, *Life After God*, Doug Coupland allows a man he calls Scout to tell about himself and his small group of friends. Scout tells about the early, carefree days of fun and camaraderie, a time of living in paradise in which "any discussion of transcendental ideas [was] pointless."{11} As time went by, however, they all saw their dreams fade in the realities of everyday life. Scout had this to say about his life:

> *Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked—away from this person I became—either against my will or by default. . . .*

He continues:

> *Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.{12}*

This first fully postmodern generation needs to understand that they aren't alone: we *all* need God.The good news is that God has not left us wandering in a dark place but has come looking for us. He is not aloof, off making other worlds, or too busy gussying up heaven to notice us down here. He has taken on our flesh and become one of us. What if God *was* one of us, Joan Osborne? He was! He looked like us, hurt like us, laughed like us. In this article I'm going to look at some of the characteristics of this God who became like us, to show how He has the answers Xers need.

God: A Person Who Sees and Feels

> *If God had a face, what would it look like?*
> *And would you want to see,*
> *If seeing meant that you would have to believe,*
> *In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints,*
> *And all the Prophets and . . .*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*
> *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah"* {13}

What *does* God look like? He doesn't have a physical body. But what does He "look" like character-wise? Those of us born before Gen-X have a hard time understanding that many in this generation have no real understanding of the God of the Bible, the one in whom we ask them to commit their very souls. Who *is* this God, anyway? Let's consider some of His characteristics.

A Person, Not a Force

First of all God is a *Person*, not some Star Wars "force." Because we're created in His image we can learn some things about Him from looking at ourselves. As we are persons, He is a Person. "He possesses life, self-consciousness, freedom, purpose, intelligence, and emotion,"{14} just like us. Thus it

could rightly be said that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham could be called “the friend of God” (James 2:23). One cannot be a friend with a “force.” Because God is a Person He can be involved in our lives, unlike a force, which cannot relate to us on a personal level.

One Who Sees . . .

Furthermore, this is a God who *sees*. The Bible teaches, “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.” (Prov. 15:3) We’re told that He knows completely. God knows when the sparrow falls from the sky; He even knows the number of hairs on our heads! (Matt. 10:29-31)

More importantly, God knows our hearts (Acts 1:24). Those who recognize their need see this as great news. If, on the other hand, this makes us fearful because we know the badness in our hearts, we’re also told that “He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust” (Psa. 103:14). God doesn’t look for those who meet His standard, for none of us can. He looks for the one who will believe and then obey. In fact, it’s at the place of our greatest need that He meets us.

. . . With a Father’s Eyes

Beyond that, God presents Himself to us as a father, as *the* Father. Unlike many fathers today, God takes His fatherhood seriously. He provides for our needs (Matt. 7:11). Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, God looks for the one who strayed away; not wishing that any should remain lost. There’s a story in the New Testament about a father whose younger son asks for his inheritance only to squander it on wild living. He winds up feeding pigs to earn his food. Finally, he comes to his senses and returns home, prepared to be as one of the hired men, to give up his rights as a son. As he is

approaching his home, his father sees him coming down the road. In his joy, the father gathers up his robe and runs down the road to embrace the son (and in those days men didn't typically act in such an undignified way), and he welcomes his son home. The father in the story represents God the Father.

One Who Feels

Even more than seeing, God *feels.* He truly "knows our pain." In Jesus, we see a God who weeps over the hardness of His people, who has compassion on those who are sick and on those caught in sin. He knows the feeling of rejection, having been rejected even by those who were close to him. When he was put to death by crucifixion he felt the weight of sin even though he had never sinned. And while bearing our sin, he felt forsaken by God, alienated, as it were, from his own Father.

In short, God is a Person who reveals Himself as the Father who knows all about us, as one who understands our hurts and who cares. This is a God who is in touch. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Reaches Out

Loves and Cares

The character Scout in Doug Coupland's book, *Life Without God,* says he needs God. One reason, he says, is "to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."{15} The implication, of course, is that God has the capacity to help people love. To do this He must be a God of love Himself.

The Bible says that God *is* love (I John 4:8,16). It is a part of His very *nature* to love. This love is shown throughout Scripture in God's dealings with His people. Some critics see

God in the Old Testament as angry and vengeful. But they are selectively focusing on the actions of a just and holy God in responding to wrongdoing. They overlook the love of God poured out on His people as He cared for them, protected them, and provided for their needs. *Lovingkindness* is a word used many times in descriptions of God. “But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,” (Ps. 86:15).

This love isn’t just for the elite, for “super people.” God cares for the “regular people.” “For there is no partiality with God,” the Bible says (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34). In fact, He chastises His people for treating the influential differently than others (James 2:1-7), and for attending to all their religious duties, but not demonstrating true love to those in need. “Learn to do right!” He says. “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:17). The second greatest commandment, in fact, is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27-37), and our neighbor is anyone who is in need. Jesus reached out to the outsiders: the prostitutes, the lepers, and the poor. Those who knew their problems were the one’s most drawn to him.

Reaches Out by Identifying and Drawing Near

What this reveals is a God that doesn’t stand aloof, but who draws near. From the beginning of the human race, He has been reaching out to us. When the first people sinned, God took the initiative to repair the breach. He established the people of Israel, and constantly sought after them, even when they were in open rebellion. This was all a precursor to God’s most astonishing move. His love for us was so great that He chose to become one of us; He didn’t stay apart from us, but rather He identified with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although he was God, He emptied Himself, and was “made in

human likeness," and became a servant (Phil. 2:7).

As the shepherd searches for his sheep, God came looking for us. "Being in very nature God," the Bible says, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus became a man so he could bring mankind to Himself. And He did it by becoming one of us. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Receives, Redeems, Reconciles, and Restores

Receives

One of the problems many Gen-Xers have is the feeling that they aren't acceptable. The child saw the departure of a parent through divorce as a personal rejection. Such familial rejection, whether real or just perceived, colors a child's attitude about himself and his acceptability. Sadly enough, many Gen-Xers deal with feelings of shame, thinking they aren't good enough. "If Dad or Mom left, I must not be worth much," they think.

Even in cases where both parents were present, children were often left to raise themselves because of their parents' jobs. "They were the first full-blown 'latchkey children,'" say Celek and Zander, "coming home to a house where nobody was home."{16} What might at first seem like wonderful freedom often resulted in fear and a sense of aloneness. Even day care wasn't always enough to relieve the sense of being alone. Again, this felt like abandonment to many kids.

God isn't like fallen people, however. He receives anyone who

will come to Him. He never turns anyone away, and He never leaves. We need not fear enemies from without, difficult tasks ahead, or the lack of provision for our needs (Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Heb. 13:5). “I will never fail you or forsake you,” is His promise, a promise that has been affirmed by His people for centuries.

Redeems

The value God places on us is revealed by the fact of Jesus’ death by crucifixion. By His death He *redeemed* us; He bought us out of slavery only to make us children of God. We are no longer “owned” by our old way of life. The slave standing on the block has been bought and paid for—not to remain as a slave but to become a child! The price we couldn’t pay, Jesus did.

Reconciles

Gen Xers can have problems getting close to people because of the rejection they have felt. After all, for many, even parents were aloof from them; why should they get close to others? They may not feel like they *can* get close to others.

We’re told in the book of Romans that God has taken the initiative to bring us close to Him, to reconcile us to Himself. Whereas formerly we were alienated from Him, now we can come near to Him in open communication. “We have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ,” the apostle Paul wrote (Rom. 5:1). God breaks down the walls for us.

Restores

Once our sin is taken care of through faith in Christ and we are reconciled with God we begin the process of being restored in the image of Christ. There is a fundamental change in us when our spirits are made alive through Christ. Building upon that, the Spirit of God begins slowly changing us from the inside out, conforming us to the image of Jesus, and making us

like Him. This restoration will be complete when we are with Him.

Summed Up in the Cross and Resurrection

All this is summed up in the work of Jesus on the cross. He paid the ultimate price for us, and enabled us to be reconciled to the Father. And we're told that in His death He called all people to Himself (John 12:32). Furthermore, when He rose from the grave, coming to life never to die again, He showed us what our hope is: our own resurrection, revealing our full restoration in His image. This restoration begins here on earth through the work of God's Spirit in us. It will be made complete when we are raised up, never to die again.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see God receiving, redeeming, reconciling, and restoring. God has done the work. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Can be Trusted

When those who are the most important to them have lied to people, they become distrustful. David Hocking tells of a woman who, after her parents had divorced, had been put in a special institution. Her parents rarely visited. When she was old enough to be on her own she began wandering from town to town, experiencing abuse and broken promises. As a result she didn't trust anyone. Rev. Hocking says, "As I began telling her of God's love for her, she asked, 'Can He be trusted?' I answered, 'Of course. He's God!' She countered, 'Why should I trust Him? Everyone else has let me down!'{17}

What does it take to build trust in a person? Hocking gives three factors: telling the truth, doing what is right and fair, and being reliable. Do these characteristics describe God?

Tells the Truth

Because God is holy or separate from all that is sinful, He is morally pure. As such He cannot lie. “It is *impossible* for God to lie,” says the New Testament (Heb. 6:18). If He says He will do something, He will do it (Num. 23:19). The people of Israel discovered that God was true to His word in fulfilling His promises. He gave them the land He had promised them, and over and over He spared them when they turned away from Him because of the covenant He had made with their forefathers. And because He cannot lie, those who believe can rest in the promises of His constant presence and of eternity with Him (Titus 1:2; Matt. 28:20).

Does What is Right and Fair

We also can count on God to do what is fair or just. If He couldn’t be depended on to do that, we would have no reason to trust Him. What if He arbitrarily changed the rules on us and judged us by a different standard? A student complains that his teacher grades inconsistently. She seems to be arbitrary in assigning values to projects, and often gives no clear word on what she expects. He says she isn’t being fair. A boss shows favoritism among his employers, advancing those who are his friends, while leaving the truly worthy behind. Not fair, we say.

God is not like this. He plays straight. He tells us what He expects, and He shows no partiality in His judgments. “Righteous are You, O Lord,” says the Psalmist, “and Your laws are right,” (Ps. 119:137). Likewise, He demands justice of us: “How blessed are those who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right,” (Ps. 106:3).

Can Be Depended Upon

Finally, God can be counted on. He is faithful to His word and His character. Knowing what He is like teaches us what He does. And one of His characteristics is being always the same: “For I, the Lord, do not change,” He says (Mal. 3:6). He is

the one “who does not change like shifting shadows” (James. 1:17). God is faithful forever to his own nature.

He is also faithful to his decrees and his promises. “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known;” He said. “[T]hen suddenly I acted, and they came to pass,” (Isa. 48:3). He promised Sarah a child in her old age, and He gave her one (Gen. 21:1). King Solomon said, “not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through His servant Moses,” (1 Kings 8:56).

God can be trusted. He tells the truth, He does what is fair, and He can be counted on. This is a God you can believe in.

Notes

1. Joan Osborne, “One of Us,” on the album *Relish*, Uni/Mercury, 1995. Downloaded from http://lyrics.astraweb.com:2000/display.cgi?joan_osborne%2E%2Erelish%2E%2Eone_of_us, Feb. 17, 2001.

2. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 53.

3. Cf. Beaudoin, 74-75.

4. Beaudoin, xiii-xiv.

5. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching The Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 43.

6. See Jerry Solomon, “Generation X“, an overview of this generation.

7. Long, 48, quoting Andrew Smith, “Talking About My Generation,” *The Face*, July 1994, p. 82.

8. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New*

Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 46.

9. Celek and Zander, 51.

10. Celek and Zander, 31-32.

11. Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 273.

12. Coupland, 310, 313, 359.

13. Osborne, *One of Us*.

14. David Hocking, *The Nature of God in Plain Language* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 65.

15. Coupland, 359.

16. Celek and Zander, 55.

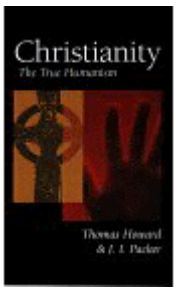
17. Hocking, 145. I am indebted to the author for the outline of this section.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

Christianity: The True Humanism

Christianity and Humanism

What does it take to be human?



Does that sound like an odd question? One is human by birth, right? J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard seek to explain and answer that question in their book *Christianity: The True Humanism*.{1} This delightful and insightful book, first published in the mid-'80s, is now back in print. Since it provides valuable insight for apologetics—and is one of my favorites—I'd like to share a few of its insights.

To bring out a Christian view of what makes for a truly fulfilling human experience, the authors contrast it with that of secular humanism. Secular humanism is the belief that mankind can truly find itself apart from any reference to God. It seeks to elevate the human race through a confidence in our ability to understand and order our world guided by our own reason and standing on the findings and possibilities of science.

One note before continuing. Some have objected to connecting the word *humanism* with *Christian*. Doesn't it suggest the exaltation of people? If you are familiar with either of the authors, you'll know that isn't their intent at all. As they say, "This book is an attempt to describe the sense in which the Christian religion both undergirds and nourishes all that seems to mark our true humanness."{2}

Because *Christianity: The True Humanism* explores the meaning of Christianity for the human experience, it adds to our apologetic for the faith. The authors write: "The best defense of any position is a creative exposition of it, and certainly that is the best means of persuading others that it is true."{3}

What Do We Need to be Human?

So, what *do* we need to live a full life? It might be hard to get started answering that, but once the answers start they come in a rush. A sense of identity is one thing we need. How about adequate food, companionship, peace, beauty, goodness, and love? Freedom, a recognition by others of one's dignity, some measure of cultural awareness, and a worthy object of veneration also fill certain needs. Recreation, a sense of one's own significance, and meaning in life are a few more.

Animals don't seem to be concerned about most of these things. As the authors say, "Once you get a dog fed he can manage. Give a puffin or a gazelle freedom to range around and it will cope without raising any awkward questions about esteem and meaning."{4}

Far from being a religion of escape which calls people away from the realities of life, as critics are wont to say, Christianity calls us to plunge in to the issues that matter most and see how the answer is found in Jesus Christ. The good things in life are pursued with God's blessing. The difficult things are taken in and worked through, leaving the results to God. Here there is no need for submerging oneself in a bottle of alcohol to relieve the stress, no approval for running from the faults of a failing spouse into the arms of another, no settling for a grimy existence from which there is no escape but death.

What is the testimony of saints around us and those who've gone before us? "If what the saints tell us is true," say the authors, "Christian vision illuminates the whole of our experience with incomparable splendor. Far from beckoning us away from raw human experience, this vision opens up to us its full richness, depth, and meaning."{5} They tell us that to run into the arms of Christ is not to run away from one's humanness, but to find out what it means to be fully human. Even our imaginations give testimony that there is more to

life than drudgery; we might try to walk machine-like through life ignoring its difficulties, but our imaginations keep bringing us back. There is something bigger. “Our imaginations insist that if it all comes to nothing then existence itself is an exquisite cheat,”{6} for it keeps drawing us higher.

In this article we’ll consider four issues—freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—as we explore what it means to be fully human.

Freedom

What does freedom mean to you? When you find yourself wishing to be free, what is it you want? Are you a harried supervisor facing demands from your superiors and lack of cooperation from your subordinates? Freedom to you might mean no demands from above and no obligations below. Are you a student? Freedom might mean no more course requirements, no more nights spent hunched over a desk while others are out having a good time.

My Webster’s dictionary gives as its first definition of freedom: “not under the control of some other person or some arbitrary power; able to act of think without compulsion or arbitrary restriction.”{7} To be free is thus to be able to do something without unreasonable restriction. Of course what will constitute the experience of freedom will vary from person to person according to our interests and desires. But are there any commonalities rooted in human nature which will inform everyone’s understanding of freedom?

A Christian View of Freedom

When we think about freedom we typically focus on our external circumstances which hinder us from doing what we want. If only our circumstances were different we could *really* be free. But if freedom lies primarily in being able to do as we please,

very few of us will ever know it. So, freedom can be very elusive; it comes in fits and snatches, and too often our sights are set on things outside our reach anyway.

Given the contrast between the dimensions of our dreams and the restrictions we face, is it possible for anyone to truly be free? It is when we understand our true nature and what we were meant to be and do.

Let's first distinguish between *subjective* freedom and *objective* freedom. *Subjective* freedom is that psychological sense of contentment and fulfillment which comes with doing the best we know and want to do. *Objective* freedom is that condition of being in a situation well-suited to our own makeup which provides for our doing the best thing. It lies, in other words, in being and doing what we were meant to be and do. Like the car engine that is free when the pistons can move up and down unhindered—and not flop wildly in all directions—we, too, are free when we operate according to our makeup and design.

Because we were created by God according to His plan, freedom results from aligning ourselves with God's design. This requires understanding human nature generally so we can know those things which are best for all people, and understanding ourselves individually so we can know what we are best suited to be and do. This understanding of human nature and of ourselves is then subjected to the law of love in service to others. Because we are made like God, we are made to do for others; to sacrifice for the good of other people. It is God's love which has set us free, and which enables us to let go of our own self-interests in order to reach out to others. This is true freedom in the objective sense. "When nothing and no one can stop you from loving, then you are free in the profoundest sense."{8} But this means being free from any desires of our own which would hinder us from doing those things for others we should be doing.

This focus on love of others contrasts sharply with what we're told in modern society, that freedom means focusing on ourselves. "It is the stark opposite of all egocentrism, self-interest, avarice, pride, and self-assertion—the very things, so we thought, that are necessary if we are ever to wrest any freedom from this struggling, overcrowded, and oppressive world of ours."{9}

The key figure to observe, of course, is Jesus. We might consider Him bound by his poverty and by the rigors of His ministry. But remember that He freely accepted the Father's call to sacrifice Himself for us. His very food was to do the will of the Father. Jesus was free because He fit perfectly in the Father's plan, and there was nothing that could keep Him from accomplishing the Father's wishes which were also His *own* desire.

In summary, the freedom people long for—of being rid of expectations and restrictions so one can do what one wants—turns out to be illusory. We are free when we rid ourselves of the things which prevent us from living in obedience to the God who has loved us and given Himself for us, for this is what we were designed to do.

Dignity

The Imago Dei

One of the words seldom heard today to describe a person is *dignified*. What does that word bring to mind? Perhaps a stately looking gentleman, dressed formally and with impeccable manners . . . but looking all the world like he'd be more comfortable if he'd just relax!

Packer and Howard believe that dignity is an important component of a full humanity. Dignity is "the quality of being worthy of esteem or honor; worthiness." It refers to a "proper pride and self-respect"{10} True dignity is not the stuffiness

of some people who think they are not part of the riff-raff of society. When we react against such arrogance we need to realize that our reaction is not against dignity itself. For it is our innate sense of the dignity of all people, no matter what their place in society, that makes such airs objectionable.

Dignity is defined objectively by our nature, and is subjectively revealed in the way we act. What is that something about us that warrants our being treated with dignity and calls for us to act dignified (in the best sense)? That something is the *imago Dei*, the image of God, which is ours by virtue of creation. We have a relationship to the Creator shared by no other creature because we are like Him. This gives us a special standing in creation, on the one hand, but makes all people equal, on the other.

Secular humanism, by contrast, sees us as just another step on the evolutionary ladder. Our dignity is dependent upon our *development* (as the highest animal currently). Although at present we might demand greater honor than animals because we're on the top, there is nothing in us by nature that makes us worthy of special honor. "By making dignity dependent upon development," Packer and Howard say, "the humanist is opening the door to the idea that less favored, less well-developed human beings have less dignity than others and consequently less claim to be protected and kept from violation than others."{11} Hence, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. One has to wonder, too, if there is a connection between we've been taught about our lack of natural worth by evolutionists and the lack of concern for behaving in a dignified manner in public life.

Furthermore, secular humanism treats people according to their usefulness, either actual or potential. "To be valued for oneself, as a person, is humanizing," say the authors, "for it ennobles; but to be valued only as a hand, or a means, or a tool, of a cog in a wheel, or a convenience to someone else is

dehumanizing—and it depresses. . . . Secular humanism, though claiming vast wisdom and life-enhancing skills, actually diminishes the individual, who is left in old age without dignity (because his or her social usefulness is finished) and without hope (because there is nothing now to look forward to)."{12}

Worship—Drawn Up to Full Height

If recognizing our dignity means understanding our highest self or nature, in what kind of situation or activity is our dignity most visible? Packer and Howard say it is in worshipping God that our dignity is most fully realized.

Why is that? There are a couple of reasons. First, we are made to worship, and dignity is found in doing what we are made to do. "The final dignity of a thing is its glory—that is, the realizing of its built-in potential for good. . . . The true glory of all objects appears when they do what they were made to do."{13} Like a car engine made to operate a certain way, we were made to bring all of our life's experience into the service of glorifying God.

Second, the object of one's worship reflects back on the worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.

Moral Life—Marking the Dignity of Others

Does all this mean non-Christians have no dignity or aren't worthy of being treated in a dignified manner? Of course not. The authors summarize their idea this way: "To the Christian, every human being has intrinsic and inalienable dignity by

virtue of being made in God's image and realizes and exhibits the full potential of that dignity only in the worship and service of the Creator."{14} Because of our inherent value as human beings, we all deserve to be treated in a certain way. Christians are to treat people according to their innate worth. We love people as Christ loves us. We also seek to guide them to the place of their highest fulfillment which is in Christ.

Thus, Christianity "reveals us to ourselves as the most precious and privileged of all God's creatures."{15} And therein lies our dignity.

Culture

What does it mean to be cultured? In one sense it has to do with the finer things in life. People visit the great museums and cathedrals and concert halls of this and other countries, take evening classes at the local college, learn foreign languages, take up painting and pottery making as hobbies. Even those who have little interest in the fine arts have an appreciation for skilled craftsmanship.

Being cultured also can mean being well-mannered, knowing what is considered appropriate and inappropriate in social interaction.

What is at the root of what it means to be cultured? Personal preference is part of it, if we're thinking of the arts for example. But culture goes deeper than that to matters of *taste*. "Taste is a facet of wisdom," say Packer and Howard; "it is the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not." It has to do with *appropriateness*, with fitness and value.

But how do we measure appropriateness? Traditionally we have measured it by our view of the value of humankind. Does what comes off the artist's easel in some manner elevate our

humanness? Or at least does it not degrade humanity? Do we treat people in a way which shows respect for them, which is the essence of good manners? To be in good taste is to be characterized by being appropriate to the situation. With respect to culture, it is to be appropriate given our nature. On the other hand, to be in poor taste is to be "unworthy of our humanness."{16} To appreciate the value in people and in their creative expression is to be cultured.

Should Christians be concerned about culture? While Christianity *per se* is indifferent to matters of culture (for the message is to all people of all cultures, and we should value the contributions of all cultures), Christians ourselves aren't to be indifferent. In our daily lives we should be demonstrating habits and tastes informed by the Gospel, and these should mark whatever we put their hands to. We are to treat people with respect as having been made in God's image. We also apply ourselves creatively in imitation of God, and our creativity should reflect God's view of mankind and the world. Our creative activity in this world is what some refer to as the "cultural mandate." "When man harnesses the powers and resources of the world around him to build a culture and so enrich community life, he is fulfilling this mandate," say our authors.{17} In doing this we reflect the redemptive work God has been doing since Adam and Eve.

While, on the one hand, we should appreciate the cultural contributions of anyone which elevate mankind and more clearly reflect God's attitude toward us and our world, on the other hand we are under no obligation to accept anything and everything in the name of "creativity." We can't applaud the blasphemous or immoral. And this is where Christianity stands against secular humanism. For the latter, in its demotion of man to the level of animal and its elevation of human liberty above all transcendent standards, must allow wide freedom in creativity, whether it be crucifixes in urine or erotic performance art. But in doing so it ultimately degrades us

rather than exalts us. A sweeping look at the 20th century with its horrific assaults on humanity offers a clue as to the strength of moral standards devoid of God's will.

A few important notes here. First, although the Bible doesn't teach standards of beauty, "it charges us to use our creativity to devise a pattern of life that will fitly express the substance of our godliness, for this is what subduing the earth, tending God's garden, and having dominion over the creatures means."{18} Second, "the Gospel is the great leveler."{19} There is no room for pride, for exalting one culture above others.

One final note. Even given all that has been said about the significance of culture and our contribution to it, it is important to note that the demonstration of God's goodness to those around us through love and works of service is more important than "cultural correctness." We cannot turn our nose up at those who prefer comic books to classics or rap to Bach. For to do so is to deny the foundations of all we have been talking about, the inherent value of the individual person.

The Sacred

Convention, Taboos, and the Divine

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins argues that people today aren't truly relativists; they've merely swapped a new set of absolutes for the old.{20} It's fairly common for conventions and taboos to change over time, rightly or wrongly. One important question we need to ask, according to Packer and Howard, is this: "Which way of doing things does a greater service to what is truly human in us?"{21}

Taboos have to do with bedrock issues of fitness and decency. Packer and Howard tell us that our many social codes of behavior are "a secular expression of our awareness of the

sacred, the inviolable, the authoritative, the 'numinous' as it is nowadays called—in short, the divine."{22}

Wait a minute. Isn't it a bit of an exaggeration to talk about taboos and conventions in terms of the divine? No, say our authors, for what we are seeking in all this is what is ultimate and fixed. Wherever there are conventions or attitudes which have such binding authority over us that to disregard them is taboo, "there you have what we called the footprints of the gods—an intuition, however anonymous and unidentified, of the divine."{23} As ideas and beliefs exert authority over our spirits, they become sacred.

We are a worshiping race. Because of our createdness we naturally find ourselves looking for the transcendent (although we typically look in the wrong places, and although secularists will deny they're looking for anything higher than what we ourselves can produce). We naturally find ourselves giving obeisance to one thing or another, often without conscious thought. "You can no more have a tribe, community, or civilization without gods," say our authors, "than you can have one without customs."{24} It is the rare secularist who is never pushed to the point of offering up a prayer in hopes that there is Someone listening. An awareness of the reality of the sacred seems to be built in to us.

In our post-Christian world there are a number of substitute religions. Even secular movements like Marxism become religions of a sort with icons and symbols and sacred books. In shrinking the sacred down to our own proportions we lose what we sought, however, for as the theology becomes debased, so does the religion. And debased religion in turn debases its devotees. Note what Paul said about this in Romans chapter 1.

The Meaning of Sacredness

With respect to God, sacredness refers to His holiness and

inviolability and to the value that inheres in all He has made. He is set apart from and above us. “He is not to be profaned, insulted, defied, or treated with irreverence in any way.”{25} God both *cannot* and *ought not* be challenged.

Furthermore, that which He has made is due a measure of honor, and those things which are set apart for special service are deserving of special honor. We wouldn’t think of tearing up the original copy of the Constitution of the United States or of splashing paint on the Mona Lisa. Likewise—but even more so—we shouldn’t think of abusing that which has come from the Maker’s hand or treating that which has been set apart for His use as cheap. Here’s an example of the latter: How many of us think of our church buildings and their furnishings as sacred in any sense? We no longer have the Temple; but are buildings erected expressly for the purpose of God’s service really just cinder blocks and wood?

Sin and the Sacred

If we aren’t to treat the objects of this world as less than they deserve, much less should we mistreat those who have been made in His image. To sin against others is to violate their sacredness and our own, for in doing so “we profane and defile the sacred reality of God’s image in us.”{26}

For the secularist, as we’ve said before, without God all things have functional value only. As things or people outlive their usefulness they are to be discarded. The unborn who are malformed are of no use; they can be discarded. So, for example, the aged, now costing society rather than contributing to it, are to be assisted in death. But not so for the Christian. In taking seriously the sacredness of God and of what He has made, we preserve ourselves and provide protection against those things and ideas that would lessen or destroy us.

Freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—four aspects of the human experience. When we look at the Christian worldview and at secularism, it is clear which provides the greater promise for mankind. It is Christianity, and not secularism, which provides for human life in its fullness.

Notes

1. J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Berkhamsted, Herts, England: Word Publishing, 1985).
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Ibid., 39.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "free."
8. Packer and Howard, 60.
9. Ibid., 68.
10. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "dignity."
11. Packer and Howard, 138-39.
12. Ibid., 160.
13. Ibid., 152.
14. Ibid., 155.
15. Ibid., 160.
16. Ibid., 167.
17. Ibid., 177.
18. Ibid., 178.
19. Ibid., 172.
20. William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996). An article I wrote on this book can be found at Probe's Web site at www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/. This article was reprinted in Jerry Solomon, ed., *Arts, Entertainment, and Christian Values: Probing the Headlines That Impact Your Family* (Grand

Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000).
21. Packer and Howard., 187.
22. Ibid., 187-88.
23. Ibid., 189.
24. Ibid., 188.
25. Ibid., 195.
26. Ibid., 206.

© 2000 Probe Ministries International

God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

Introducing Open Theism

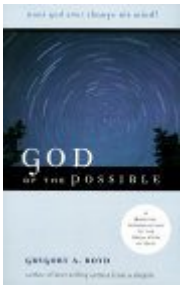
What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who

even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.{1}

Boyd asks the question: "Does God ever change His mind?" He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. "The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it," says Boyd.{2}

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of

confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we'll consider Boyd's ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we'll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

The Classical View of God's Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His

being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.{4}

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because

He planned it.{5} Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.{6} Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.{7} So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.{8}

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man

in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."{9} Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."{10} If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.{11}

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."{12}

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future

already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."{13} Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold, unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."{14} If God doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel

prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.{15}

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences Himself.{16} Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.{17}

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

Notes

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

2. Ibid., 31.

3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. Emergence, 52-55.

4. Boyd, 32.

5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology: A Compendium (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.

6. Boyd, 127.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 120.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 126.

12. Ibid., 125.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 44.

15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.

16. Erickson, 206-209.

17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, “Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency,” in

Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

©2000 Probe Ministries.