

# The Christian and the Arts

*How should Christians glorify God in the ways we interact with the arts and express our artistic bent?*



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

Is there a legitimate place for the appreciation of art and beauty in our lives? What is the relationship of culture to our spiritual life? Are not art and the development of aesthetic tastes really a waste of time in the light of eternity? These are questions Christians often ask about the fine arts.

Unfortunately, the answers we often hear to such questions imply that Christianity can function quite nicely without an aesthetic dimension. At the heart of this mentality is Tertullian's (160-220 A.D.) classic statement, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Academy with the Church? We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor inquiry since the evangel."

This bold assertion has led many to argue that the spiritual life is essential, but the cultural inconsequential. And today much of the Christian community seems inclined to approach aesthetics in the same hurried and superficial manner with which we live most of our lives. This attitude was vividly expressed recently in a cartoon portraying an American rushing into the Louvre in Paris. The caption read, "Where's the Mona Lisa? I'm double parked!"

## Art and Aesthetics

What is aesthetics? Let us begin with a definition. Aesthetics is "The philosophy of beauty and art. It studies the nature of beauty and laws governing its expression, as in the fine arts, as well as principles of art criticism"[\[1\]](#). Formally,

aesthetics is thus included in the study of philosophy. Ethical considerations to determine “good” and “bad” include the aesthetic dimension.

Thus, beauty can be contemplated, defined, and understood for itself. This critical process results in explaining why some artists, authors, and composers are great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile. Aesthetics therefore

“. . . aims to solve the problem of beauty on a universal basis. If successful, it would presently furnish us with an explanation of the quality common to Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance paintings, and all good art from whatever place or time.”[{2}](#)

At the heart of aesthetics, then, is *human creativity* and its diverse cultural expressions. H. Richard Neibuhr has defined it as “the work of men’s minds and hands.” While nature (as God’s gift) provides the raw materials for human expression, culture is that which man produces in his earthly setting. It . . . “includes the totality and the life pattern—language, religion, literature (if any), machines and inventions, arts and crafts, architecture and decor, dress, laws, customs, marriage and family structures, government and institutions, plus the peculiar and characteristic ways of thinking and acting.”[{3}](#)

Aesthetic taste is interwoven all through the cultural fabric of a society and thus cannot be ignored. It is therefore inescapable—for society and for the individual. Human creativity will inevitably express itself and the results (works of art) will tell us something about its creators and the society from which they came. “Through art, we can know another’s view of the universe.”[{4}](#)

“As such, works of art are often more accurate than any other indication about the state of affairs at some remote but crucial juncture in the progress of humanity. . . . By

studying the visual arts from any society, we can usually tell what the people lived for and for what they might be willing to die.”[\[5\]](#)

The term *art* can mean many different things. In the broadest sense, everything created by man is art and everything else is nature, created by God. However, art usually denotes *good* and *beautiful* things created by mankind (Note: A major point of debate in the field of aesthetics centers around the definition of these two terms). Even crafts and skills, such as carpentry or metal working have been considered by many as *arts*.

While the works of artisans of earlier eras have come to be viewed like fine art, the term *the arts*, however, has a narrower focus in this outline. We are here particularly concerned with those activities of mankind which are motivated by the creative urge, which go beyond immediate material usefulness in their purpose, and which express the uniqueness of being human. This more limited use of the term *art* includes music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, drama and literature. The *fine arts* is the study of those human activities and acts which produce and are considered works of art.

Aesthetics then is the study of human responses to things considered beautiful and meaningful. The arts is the study of human actions which attempt to arouse an aesthetic experience in others. A sunset over the mountains may evoke aesthetic response, but it is not considered a piece of art, because it is nature. A row of telephone poles with connecting power lines may have a beautiful appearance, but they are not art because they were not created with an artistic purpose in mind. It must be noted, however, that even those things originally made for non-artistic purposes can and have later come to be viewed as art objects (i.e., antiques).

While art may have the secondary result of earning a living

for the artist, it always has the primary purpose of creative expression for describably and indescribably human experiences and urges. The artist's purpose is to create a special kind of honesty and openness which springs from the soul and is hopefully understood by others in their inner being.

## **Aesthetics and the Bible**

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to stultify or look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical perspective. At the heart of this is the general mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God. We are to offer Him the best that we have—intellectually, artistically, and spiritually.

Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the Incarnation ("the Word made flesh"), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of "other-worldly-ness" that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul's statement, "Unto the pure, all things are pure," (Tit. 1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by god, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

### ***The Old Testament***

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the aesthetic dimension. In Exodus 20:4-5 and Leviticus 26:1, God makes it clear that He does not forbid the *making* of art, only the *worshipping* of art. Consider the use of these vehicles of artistic expression found throughout:

**Architecture.** God is concerned with architecture. In fact, Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the Tabernacle. Similar instructions were given for the temple later constructed by King Solomon. Here we find something unique in history—art works designed and conceived by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Apparently He delights in color, texture, and form. (We also see this vividly displayed in nature). The point is that God did not instruct men to build a purely *utilitarian* place where His chosen people could worship Him. As Francis Schaeffer said, “God simply wanted beauty in the Temple. God is interested in beauty.”[\[6\]](#) And in Exodus 31, God even names the artists He wants to create this beauty, *commissioning* them to their craft for His glory.

**Poetry** is another evidence of God’s love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament is poetry, and since God inspired the very words of Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages. David, the man after God’s own heart, composed many poems of praise to God, while under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Among the most prominent poetical books are: Psalms. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Poetry is also a significant element in the prophets and Job.

The genre of poetry varies with each author’s intent. For example, the Song of Solomon is first and foremost a love poem picturing the beauty and glory of romantic, human love between a man and his mate. It is written in the form of lyric idyll, a popular literary device in the Ancient Near East. The fact that this story is often interpreted symbolically to reflect the love between Christ and His Church, or Jehovah and Israel, does not weaken the celebration of physical love recorded in the poem, nor destroy its literary form.

**Drama** was also used in Scripture at God's command. The Lord told Ezekiel to get a brick and draw a representation of Jerusalem on it. The Ezekiel "acted out" a siege of the city as a warning to the people. He had to prophesy against the house of Israel while lying on his left side. This went on for 390 days. Then he had to lie on his right side, and he carried out this drama by the express command of God to teach the people a lesson (Ezek. 4:1-6). The dramatic element is vivid in much of Christ's ministry as well. Cursing the fig tree, writing in the dirt with His finger, washing the feet of the disciples are dramatic actions which enhanced His spoken word.

**Music and Dance** are often found in the Bible in the context of rejoicing before God. In Exodus 15, the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5, we find musicians in the temple, their instruments *specifically made* by King David for praising God. 2 Chronicles 29:25-26 says that David's command to have music in the temple was from God, "for the command was from the Lord through His prophets." And we must not forget that all of the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

### ***The New Testament***

The New Testament abounds as well with evidence underscoring artistic imperatives. The most obvious is the example of *Jesus Himself*. First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, we encounter in Jesus a person who loved to be outdoors and one who was extremely attentive to His surroundings. His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest, the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a bruised reed, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master storyteller. He readily made use of his own culture setting to impart his message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories but they were nevertheless used as vehicles of communication to

teach spiritual truths. And certainly the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 includes the artistic gifts.

The apostle Paul also alludes to aesthetics in Philippians 4:8 when he exhorts believers to meditate and reflect upon pure, honest, lovely, good, virtuous and praiseworthy things. We are further told in Revelation 15:2-3 that art forms will even be present in heaven. So the arts have a place in both the earthly and heavenly spheres!

We should also remember that the *entire Bible* is not only revelation, it also is itself a work of art. In fact, it is many works of art—a veritable *library of great literature*. We have already mentioned poetry, but the Bible includes other literary forms as well. For example, large portions of it are narrative in style. Most of the Old Testament is either *historical narrative* or *prophetic narrative*. And the Gospels, (which recount the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ), are *biographical narrative*. Even the personal letters of Paul and the other New Testament authors can quite properly be considered *epistolary literature*.

## **Aesthetics and Nature**

The Bible makes it very clear that a companion volume, the book of Nature, has a distinct aesthetic dimension. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, and blazing sunsets routinely evoke human aesthetic response as easily as can a vibrant symphony or a dazzling painting. The very fabric of the universe expresses God's presence with majestic beauty and grandeur. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork." In fact, nature has been called the "aesthetics of the Infinite."

The brilliant photography of the twentieth century has revealed the limitless depths of beauty in nature. Through telescope or microscope, one can devote a lifetime to the study of some part of the universe—the skin, the eye, the sea,

the flora and fauna, the stars, the climate.

And since God's creation is multi-dimensional, an apple, for instance, can be viewed in different ways. It can be considered economically (how much it costs), nutritionally (its food value), chemically (what it's made of), or physically (its shape). But it may also be examined aesthetically: its taste, color, texture, smell, size, and shape. All of nature can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities which find their source in God, their Creator.

## Human Creativity

Wherever human culture is found, artistic expression of some form is also found. The painting on the wall of an ancient cave, or a medieval cathedral, or a modern dramatic production are all expressions of *human creativity*, given by God, the Creator.

### Man in God's Image

In Genesis 1:26-27, for example, we read: "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over . . . all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' And God created man *in His own image, in the image of God He created him* male and female He created them" (Italics mine).

After creating man, God told man to subdue the earth and to rule over it. Adam was to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) which was described by God as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The implication of this is very important. God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of "creation" with Him. He has permitted humans to take the elements of His cosmos and create new arrangements with them. Perhaps this explains the reason why creating anything is so fulfilling to us. We can express a drive within which allows us to do something all



humans uniquely share with their Creator.

God has thus placed before the human race a banquet table rich with aesthetic delicacies. He has supplied the basic ingredients, inviting those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest extent possible. We are privileged as no other creature to make and enjoy art.

It should be further noted that *art of all kinds is restricted to a distinctively human practice*. No animal practices art. It is true that instinctively or accidentally beautiful patterns are formed and observed throughout nature. But the spider's web, the honeycomb, the coral reef are *not conscious* attempts of animals to express their aesthetic inclinations. To the Christian, however, they surely represent God's efforts to express. Unlike the animals, man *consciously* creates. Francis Schaeffer has said of man:

"[A]n art work has value as a creation because man is made in the image of God, and therefore man not only can love and think and feel emotion, but also has the capacity to create. Being in the image of the Creator, we are called upon to have creativity. We never find an animal, non-man, making a work of art. On the other hand, we never find men anywhere in the world or in any culture in the world who do not produce art. Creativity is a part of the distinction between man and non-man. All people are to some degree creative. Creativity is intrinsic to our mannishness." [\[7\]](#)

## **The Fall of Man**

There is a dark side to this, however, because sin entered and affected all of human life. A bent and twisted nature has emerged, tainting every field of human endeavor or expression and consistently marring all results. The unfortunate truth is that divinely endowed creativity will always be accompanied in earthly life by the *reality and presence of sin expressed through a fallen race*. Man is Jekyll and Hyde: noble image-

bearer and morally crippled animal. His works of art are therefore bittersweet. Calvin acknowledged this tension when he said:

“The human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only foundation of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to Him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the Giver.”[\[8\]](#)

Understanding this dichotomy allows Christians genuinely to appreciate something of the contribution of every artist, composer, or author. God is sovereign and dispenses artistic talents upon whom He will. While Scripture keeps us from emulating certain lifestyles of artists or condoning some of their ideological perspectives, we can nevertheless admire and appreciate their talent, which ultimately finds its source in God. This should and can be done without compromise and without hesitation.

The fact is that if God can speak through a burning bush or Baalam’s ass, He can speak it through a hedonistic artist! The question can never be how worthy is the vessel, but rather, Has truth been expressed? God’s truth is still sounding forth today—from the Bible, from nature, and even from a fallen humanity.

Because of the Fall, absolute beauty in the world is gone. But participation in the aesthetic dimension reminds us of the beauty that once was, and anticipates its future luster. With such beauty present today that can take one’s breath away, even in this unredeemed world, one can by speculate about what lies ahead for those who love Him!

# Characteristics of Good Art

We now turn to the question of the important ingredients of various art forms.

First, artistic truth includes not only the tangible, but also the *realm of the imaginative, the intangible*. Art therefore may or may not include the cognitive, the objective. Someone asked a Russian ballerina who had just finished an interpretive dance, "What did it mean? What were you trying to say?" The ballerina replied, "If I could have said it, I wouldn't have danced it!" There is then a communication of truth in art which is real, but may not be able to be reduced to and put neatly into words.

Great art is also always coupled with *the hard discipline of continual practice*. Great artists are the ones who, when observed in the practice of their art appear to be doing something simple and effortless. What is not visible are the bone weary hours of committed practice that precede such artistic spontaneity and deftness.

*All art has intrinsic value*. It doesn't have to *do* anything to have value. Once created, it has already "done" something. It does not have to be a *means* to an end, nor have any utilitarian benefit whatsoever. Even *bad art* has some value because as a creative work, it is still linked to God Himself, the Fountain of all creativity. The creative process, however expressed, is good because it is linked to the *Imago Dei* and shows that man, unique among God's creatures, has this gift. This is true even when the results of the creative gift (specific works of art) may be aesthetically poor or present the observer with unwholesome content and compromising situations.

But we would do well to remind ourselves at this point that God does not censor out all of the things in the Bible which are wrong or immoral. He "tells it like it is," including some

pretty detailed and sordid affairs! The discriminating Christian should therefore develop the capacity to distinguish poor aesthetics and immoral artistic statements from true creativity and craftsmanship<sup>3</sup> dismissing and repudiating the former while fully appreciating and enjoying the latter. Christians, beyond all others, possess the proper framework to understand and appreciate all art in the right perspective. It is a pity that many have deprived themselves of the arts so severely from much that they could enjoy under the blessing and grace of God.

Artistic expression *always makes a statement*. It may be either *explicitly* or *implicitly* stated. Some artists explicitly admit their intent is to say something, to convey a message. Other artists resist, or even deny they are making a statement. But consciously or not, a statement is always being made, because each artist is subjectively involved and profoundly influenced by his/her cultural experience. Consciously or unconsciously, the cultural setting permeates every artistic contribution and each work tells us something about the artist and his era.

An unfortunate trend in recent years has been the increase in the number of artists who admit their primary desire is to say *something*. Art is not best served by an extreme focus on making a statement. The huge murals prominent in former communist lands were no doubt helpful politically, but they probably did not contribute much aesthetically. Even some Christian art falls into this trap. Long on statement, morality, and piety, it often falls short artistically (though sincerely offered and theologically sound), because it is cheaply and poorly done. Poetry and propaganda are not the same, from communist or Christian zealot.

Another characterization of modern statements is the *obsession of self*. Since the world has little meaning to many moderns, the narcissistic retreat into self is all that remains to be expressed. Thus the public is confronted today with many artists who simply portray their own personal psychological

and spiritual wanderings. In art of this type, extreme subjectivism is considered virtue rather than vice. The statement (personal to the extreme) overwhelms the art. Many of these statements seem to imply a desperate cry for help, for significance, for love. In such art feelings overwhelm form; confessional outpourings bring personal relief, but little effort is put forth or the thought necessary for the rigid mastery of technique and form. Perhaps that is why there is such a glut of mediocre art today! It simply doesn't take as much or as long to produce it.

But consider artists of earlier centuries, those who never even signed their names to their work. This was not because they were embarrassed by it. They simply lived in a culture where the art was more important than the artist. Today we are awed more by the artist or the virtuoso performer than we are by the art expressed. Much of the earlier work was dedicated to God; ours is mostly dedicated to the celebration of the artist. Critic Chad Walsh alludes to a modern exception in the writings of C. S. Lewis when he says that *Mere Christianity* "transcends itself and its author . . . it is as though all the brilliant writing is designed to create clear windows of perception, so that the reader will look *through* the language and not *at* it." [\[9\]](#) Great art possesses this transcendent durability.

Art forms and styles are constantly *changing through cultural influences*. The common mistake of many Christians today is to consider one form "godly" and another "ungodly." Many would dismiss the cubism of Duchamp or the surrealism of Dali as worthless, while holding everything from the brush of Rembrandt to be inspired. This attitude reveals nothing more than the personal aesthetic tastes of the one doing the evaluating.

Form and style must be considered in their historical and cultural contexts. A westerner would be hard pressed, if totally unfamiliar with the music of Japan, to distinguish

between a devout Buddhist hymn, a sensual love song, and a patriotic melody, even if he heard them in rapid sequence. But every Japanese could do so immediately because of familiarity with their own culture.

Aesthetic sense is therefore greatly conditioned by personal cultural experience. Just as each child is born with the capacity to learn language, so each of us is born with an aesthetic sensibility which is influenced by the culture which surrounds us. To judge the art or music of Japan as inferior to American art or music is as senseless as suggesting the Japanese language is inferior to the English language. Difference or remoteness do not imply inferiority!

*Truth can be expressed by non-believers, and error may be expressed by believers.* When Paul delivered his famous Mars Hill address in Athens, he quoted from a pagan poet (Acts 17:28) to communicate a biblical truth. In this case, Paul used a secular source to communicate biblical truth because the statement affirmed the truth of revelation. On the other hand, error can be communicated in a biblical context. For example, in Exodus 32:2-4 we find Aaron fashioning a golden calf for the children of Israel to worship. This was a wrong use of art because it directly disobeyed God's command not to worship any image.

## **Evaluating Art**

How should a Christian approach art in order to evaluate it? Is beauty simply "in the eye of the beholder?" Or are there guidelines from Scripture which will provide a framework for the evaluation and enjoyment of art?

Earlier, we mentioned a statement by Paul from Philippians 4. While the biblical context of this passage looks beyond aesthetics, in a categorical way we are given in the passage (by way of application) some criteria necessary for artistic analysis. Each concept Paul mentions in verse 8 can be used as

sort of a “key” to unlock the significance of the art we encounter and to genuinely appreciate it.

**Truth.** It is probably not by accident that Paul begins with *truth*. Obviously not every work of art contains a truth statement. But wherever and to what extent such a statement is being made, the Christian is compelled to ask, “Is this really true?” Does life genuinely operate in this fashion in the light of God’s revelation? And Christians must remember that truth is honestly facing the negatives as well as the positives of reality. Negative content has its place, even in a Christian approach to art. But Christian hope allows us to view these works in a different light. We sorrow, but not like those who have no hope. Ours is a sorrow of expectancy and ultimate triumph; there is one of total pessimism and despair.

**Honor.** A second aesthetic key has to do with the concept of honor and dignity. This can be tied back to what was said earlier about the nature of man created in God’s image. This gives a basis, for example, to reject the statement being made in the total life work of Francis Bacon (d. 1993). In many of his paintings this contemporary British artist presents us with solitary, decaying humans on large, depressing canvasses. Deterioration and hopeless despair are the hallmarks of his artistic expression. But if Christianity is true, these are inaccurate portrayals of man. They are half-truths. They leave out completely a dimension which is really true of him. Created in God’s image, he has honor and dignity—even though admittedly he is in the process of dying, aging, wasting away. The Christian is the only one capable of truly comprehending what is missing in Bacon’s work. Without a Christian base, we would have to look at the paintings and admit man’s “true” destiny, i.e., extinction, along with the rest of the cosmos. But as Christians we can and must resist this message, because it is a lie. The gospel gives real hope—to individuals and to history. These are missing from Bacon’s work and are the direct result of his distorted worldview.

**Just.** The third key to aesthetic comprehension has to do with the moral dimension. Not all art makes a moral statement. A Haydn symphony does not, nor does a portrait by Renoir. But where such a statement *is* being made, Christians must deal with it, not ignore it. We will also do well to remember that moral statements can often be stated powerfully in negative ways, too. Picasso's *Guernica* comes to mind. He was protesting the bombing by the Germans of a town by that name just prior to World War II. Protesting injustice is a cry for justice. Only the Christian is aware and sure of where it can ultimately be found.

**Pure.** This fourth key also touches on the moral—by contrasting that which is innocent, chaste, and pure from that which is sordid, impure, and worldly. An accurate application of the principle will help distinguish the one from the other. For instance, one need not be a professional drama critic to identify and appreciate the fresh, innocent love of *Romeo and Juliet*, nor to distinguish it from the erotic escapades of a *Tom Jones*. The same dynamic is at work when comparing Greek nudes and *Playboy* centerfolds. One is lofty, the other cheap. The difference is this concept of purity. It allows the Christian to look at two nudes and quite properly designate one “art” and the other “pornography.” Possessing the mind of Christ, we have the equipment for identifying purity and impurity to a high degree.

**Lovely.** While the first four concepts have dealt with facets of artistic statements, the fifth focuses on sheer aesthetic beauty. “Whatsoever things are lovely,” Paul says. A landscape makes no moral statement, but it can exhibit great beauty. The geometric designs of Mondrian may say nothing about justice, but they can definitely engage us aesthetically. The immensity and grandeur of a Gothic cathedral will inspire artistic awe in any sensitive breast, but they may do little else. Again, the Christian is equipped to appreciate a wide range of artistic mediums and expressions. If there is little to



evaluate morally and rationally, we are still free to appreciate what is beautiful in the art.

**Good Report.** In this concept, we have the opportunity to evaluate the life and character of the artist. What kind of a person is he? If a statement is being made, does the artist, composer, or author believe in that statement? Or was it to please a patron, a colleague, or a critic? Is there a discontinuity between the statement of the work and the statement being made through the personal life of its creator? For example, Handel's *Messiah* is a musical masterpiece, but he was no saint! Filippo Lippi used his own mistress as a model for Mary in this Madonna paintings. The "less than exemplary" lifestyle of a creative person may somewhat tarnish his artistic contribution, but it does not necessarily or totally obliterate it. Something of God's image always shines through in the creative process. The Christian can always give glory to God for that, even if a work of art has little else going for it. The greatest art is true, skillfully expressed, imaginative, and unencumbered by the personal and emotional hang-ups of its originators.

**Excellence.** This is a comparative term. It speaks of degrees, assuming that something else is not excellent. The focus is on quality. Quality can mean many things in the realm of art, but one sure sign of it is craftsmanship. *Technical mastery* is one of the essential ingredients which separates the great artist from the rank amateur. Obviously, the more one knows about technique and artistic skill, the better one is able to appreciate whether an individual artist, author, composer, or performer has what is necessary to produce great art. Many Christians have made unfortunate value judgments about art of all kinds. Through ignorance and naivete, superficial understanding of technique has been followed by smug rejection. This has erected barriers instead of bridges built to the artistic community, thus hindering a vital witness. We need to know *what* is great art and *why* it is considered such.

Excellence is also found in the *durability of art*. Great art lasts. If it has been around several hundred years, it probably has something going for it. It has “staying power.” Christians should realize that some of the art of this century will not be around in the next. Much of it will pass off the scene. This is a good indication that it does not possess great aesthetic value; it is not excellent.

**Praise.** Here we are concerned with the impact or the effect of the art. Is *anything* praiseworthy? The crayola scribblings of a toddler are praiseworthy to some extent, but it does not elicit a strong aesthetic response. We are not gripped or overpowered by it. But great art has power and is therefore a forceful tool of communication. Francis Schaeffer has mentioned that the greater the art, the greater the impact. Does it please or displease? Inspire or depress? Does it influence thinking and behavior? Would it change a person? Would it change you. Herein lies the “two-edged-swordness” of art. It can elevate a culture to lofty heights and it can help bring a society to ruin. It is the *result* of culture, but it can also *influence* culture.

## Conclusion

Paul undergirds this meaty verse with the final command, *think on these things*. Two very important propositions come forth with which we can conclude this section. First, he reminds us that *Christianity thrives on intelligence*, not ignorance—even in the aesthetic realm. Christians *need* their minds when confronting the artistic expressions of a culture. To the existentialist and the nihilist, the mind is an enemy, but to the Christian, it is a friend. Second, it is noteworthy that Paul has suggested such a *positive approach* to life and, by application, to art. He doesn't tell us that whatsoever things are false, dishonorable, unjust impure, ugly, of bad report, poorly crafted, and mediocre are to have the focus of our attention. Here again the *hope* of the Christian's approach to life in general rings clearly through. Our lives are not to be

lived in the minor key. We observe the despair, but we can see something more. God has made us more than conquerors!

## Arts, Culture and the Christian

We now turn to two final areas of consideration in the way of suggested applications of what has been discussed.

### Christ and Culture

At the beginning, we mentioned that aesthetics is related to culture, because in culture we find the expressions of human creativity. In his very fine book, *A Return to Christian Culture*, Richard Taylor points out that each of us is related to culture in two ways: we find ourselves *within* a cultural setting and we each *possess* a culture personally. That is, society has certain acceptable patterns to which individuals are expected to conform. When one does so, one is considered “cultured.”

In the light of Romans 12:2 and other biblical passages, the challenge for the Christian is to resist being “poured into the mold of the world” without also throwing out legitimate aesthetic interests. At the individual level, a Christian should seek to bring his maximum efforts toward the “. . . development of the person, intellectually, aesthetically, socially to the full use of his powers, in compatibility with the recognized standards of excellence of his society.”[\[10\]](#)

Culturally speaking, the same goal could be stated for Christian and non-Christian alike, but the Christian who wants to reflect the best in culture has his/her different motives. And some Christians can display the fruit of the Spirit, but be largely bereft of cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. D. L. Moody is said to have “butchered the King’s English,” but he was used mightily by God on two continents. This would suggest that cultural sophistication is not absolutely necessary for God to use a person for spiritual purposes, but

one could well ponder how many opportunities to minister have been lost because an individual has made a cultural "*faux pas*." The other side of the coin is that a person may have reached the pinnacle of social and aesthetic acceptability but have no spiritual impact on his surroundings whatsoever.

Three words are important to keep in mind while defining Christian responsibility in any culture. The first is *cooperation* with culture. The reason for this cooperation is that we might identify with our culture so it may be influenced for Jesus Christ. Jesus is a model for us here. He was not generally a non-conformist. He attended weddings and funerals, synagogues and feast. He was a practicing Jew. He generally did the culturally acceptable things. When He did not, it was for clear spiritual principles.

A second word is *persuasion*. The Bible portrays Christians as salt and light, the penetrating and purifying elements within a culture. Christianity is intended to have a sanctify influence on a culture, not be swallowed up by it in one compromise after another.

A third concept is *confrontation*. By carefully using Scripture, Christians can challenge and reject those elements and practices within a culture that are incompatible with biblical truth. There are times when Christians must confront society. Things such as polygamy, idolatry, sexual immorality, and racism should be challenged head-on by Christians.

How can accomplish this kind of impact? First by the *development of high personal, cultural, and aesthetic standards*. These include tact, courtesy, dress, and speech. In doing this, Christians need to avoid two extremes. The first is the tendency to try to "keep up with the Joneses." This becomes the "Cult of the Snob." A second extreme is to react against the Joneses and join the "Cult of the Slobs."

Second, Christians must employ all of life to proclaim a

Christian worldview. In a century dominated by darkness, despair, and dissonance, Christians can still offer a message and demeanor of hope. If being a Christian is a superior way of living, its benefits should be apparent to all.

Finally, Christians should be encouraged to *become involved in the arts*. This can be done first of all by learning to evaluate and appreciate the arts with greater skill. Generally, Christians can become involved in the arts in one of three ways.

### **Involvement in the Arts**

One of the deep hopes for this paper is that it might instill in the reader a healthy desire to plunge more deeply into the arts and enjoy what is there with the freedom Christ has given. It might encourage us to remind ourselves that Paul lived in a X-rated culture similar to our own. Yet he and most of the other believers kept their spiritual equilibrium in such a setting and were used mightily by God in their culture.

Too often today Christians, like the Pharisees of old, are seeking to eliminate the leprous elements which touch their lives. With increasing isolation, they are focused more on what the diseases of society can do to them than how they might affect the diseased! Nowhere is this more critically experienced than in the arts. We mostly shy away from those contexts which disturb us. And there is today much in the arts to disturb us—be we creator, spectator (a form of participation) or performer.

Ugliness and decadence abound in every culture and generation. From this we cannot escape. But Jesus touched the leper. He made contact with the diseased one in need. As Christians, our focus should be not on what art brings to us, but rather what we can bring to the art! Therefore the development of imagination and a wholesome, expanded analysis of even the many negative contemporary works is possible when viewed in

the broad themes of humanity, life, and experience of a truly Christian worldview. Great art is more than a smiling landscape. Beauty and truth include terrible and ominous aspects as well, like a storm on the ocean, or the torn life of a prostitute.

Christians can also experience the arts as *participators and performers*. If each person is created in the image of God, some creativity is there to be personally expressed in every one of us. Learn what artistic talents you have. Discover how you can best express your creativity and then do so. Learn an instrument, write some poetry. Take part in a stage production. Your Christianity will not mean less, but more to you if you do.

A third area often overlooked must also be mentioned. I refer to those greatly gifted and talented Christians among us who should be encouraged to *consider the arts as a career*. A Christian influence in the arts is sorely needed today, and things will not improve as long as Christians are happy to allow the bulk of contemporary artistry to flow forth from those who have no personal relationship with the One who gave them their talents. The artistic environment is a tough place to live out your Christian faith, and the dangers are great, but to do so successfully will bring rich rewards and lasting fruit.

Gini Andrews, an acclaimed concert pianist and author, writes of the great need for Christians to excel in all the artistic fields and sounds a challenge for them to develop their gifts:

“All the disciplines, music, painting, sculpture, theater, and writing, are in need of pioneers who seek a way to perform in a twentieth century manner; to show with quality work that there is an answer to the absurdity of life, to the threat of annihilation, to the mechanization of man, the message being sounded loud and clear by the non-Christian artist. . . . “If we are to present God’s message to

disillusioned, frenetic twentieth century people, it's going to take His creativity expressed in special ways. I hope that some of you in the creative fields will be challenged by the Almightyness of our Creator-God and will spend long hours before Him, saying, like Jacob, 'I will not go unless you bless me, until you show me how to speak out your wonder to the contemporary mind.'"[\[11\]](#)"

Here is expressed the unprecedented challenge and opportunity before the body of Christ today. May God enable us to seize it.

## Notes

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## M.I.T. Dean's Pants on Fire

George Washington, call your agent. America needs your “I cannot tell a lie” message. A national lecture circuit slot just became available.

A popular dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has resigned after admitting resume padding and living a 28-year lie. Ouch. Her sad story is filled with irony—lots of fresh material for your speeches.

Marilee Jones says, “I have resigned as MIT’s Dean of Admissions because very regrettably, I misled the Institute about my academic credentials. I misrepresented my academic degrees when I first applied to MIT 28 years ago and did not have the courage to correct my resume when I applied for my current job or at any time since.

“I am deeply sorry for this,” she continues, “and for disappointing so many in the MIT community and beyond who supported me, believed in me, and who have given me extraordinary opportunities.” [{1}](#)

*The Boston Globe* reports that her resume claimed degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and two other New York institutions, but that she has degrees from none of them. RPI says she attended as a part-time student for about nine months but earned no degree. The other two say they have no record of her attending. [{2}](#)

Ironically, as *The New York Times* notes, Jones was widely



admired, almost revered, for her humor, outspokenness and common sense. {3} She had won prestigious MIT awards{4} and earned a national reputation as a champion for reducing college admissions pressure on students and parents.

It gets worse. She coauthored the book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*. On integrity, it says, "Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners. But just remember that what goes around comes around, meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out." {5}

Doesn't it.

Lots of people lie. Some get caught. The US military reportedly distorted Pat Tillman's and Jessica Lynch's stories, allegedly to boost war efforts. Enron executives cooked books for personal gain.

Employees falsify expense accounts or call in sick. Kids disavow breaking windows. Adults tell fish stories. Wandering spouses work late at the office.

Distorting the truth can bring esteem, opportunity, money, thrills. One innocent lie can require cover-ups. Soon the web becomes complex.

We've all made mistakes. As a teen, I valued my reputation for honesty but made some poor choices, lied about them, and nearly was expelled from school. My confronters forgave me and offered me another chance. The episode helped point me to personal faith. I learned that Moses, the great Jewish liberator, warned his compatriots against violating divine prescription: "Be sure your sin will find you out." {6}

Mine found me out. Marilee Jones deceit found her out, as readers from *The Times* of London to *The Times* of India now know.

Jones likely needs privacy—as she has requested—plus good friends, close counsel, and lots of prayers. Perhaps, after recovery, she can help others resist similar temptations.

So, President Washington, what lessons from this episode will your lecture tour emphasize? How about these: Tell the truth. It may be painful but it's the right thing to do. It's easier to remember. You'll sleep better and enhance society.

Pack your saddle bags, Mr. President. Crank up the PowerPoint. Be sure to include a Pinocchio cartoon and some slides of cherry trees.

Oh, but sir, we understand that the cherry tree story might be mere legend. We suggest you explain that to your audiences and give plenty of real-life illustrations.

## Notes

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# “Mistakes Were Made”

If you're the nation's top cop, you know it's a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales' ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

## Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We're investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We'll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don't want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I'll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an “astonishingly maladroitness...Nixonian...dodge.”<sup>{1}</sup> Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake's press agent announced back then, “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance.”<sup>{2}</sup> Jackson told a press conference, “If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention.”<sup>{3}</sup>

William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: “the past exonerative.”[{4}](#)

## **True Confessions**

What did Gonzales mean? I don’t know; I’m still watching. But the “mistakes were made” flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I’m sorry; please forgive me?

That’s seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: “I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician.”[{5}](#) Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, “Never apologize, never explain.”[{6}](#) Literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, “No sensible person ever made an apology.”[{7}](#)

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he’d ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn’t.”

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

## **Plastic Buckets**

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to ... [God], he

is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.{8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

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8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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## Giving Can Improve Your Health; Science Says So

Want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

It really is good to be good, claims Stephen Post, Ph.D., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Science says it is so.

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their recent book, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>{1}</sup> As head of an institute supported by philanthropist Sir John Templeton<sup>{2}</sup>, Post has funded over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities. He's convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in a fragmented society.

Post says research has produced remarkable findings: Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease. If pharmaceutical companies could charge for giving, we might see ads for Give Back instead of Prozac, he speculates. One program, Rx: Volunteer, has some California HMO physicians giving volunteerism prescriptions to their Medicare patients.

# All You Need is Love?

Post and Neimark say around 500 scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied University of California Berkeley data that followed about two hundred people every decade since the 1920s. Giving during high school correlated with good mental and physical health across life spans. Givers experienced these benefits regardless of the warmth of their families, he found.

Other research says that giving correlates with lower teen depression and suicide risk and with lower depression among the elderly. Studies at Stanford and elsewhere found links between frequent volunteering and delaying death. Post says giving even trumps receiving when it comes to reducing mortality.

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."[\[3\]](#)

Illustrations abound of givings personal benefits. Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller's goal was to eliminate poverty housing from the face of the earth. Get rid of shacks!

Today Habitat volunteers have constructed over 225,000 houses, helping over a million people in over 3,000 communities worldwide. Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings.

# From Playmate to Orphan Care

Post and Neimark relate an intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher's childhood helped her connect with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the Playboy mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for 2,300 children. "I work long hours," Krabacher notes, "put up with unbelievable sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world."

Post would agree. Do you desire happiness, love, safety, security, loyal friends, true connection, or a benevolent and hopeful world? He has one answer: Give. You'll be happier, healthier, and live longer. Love cures, wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.

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# China, The Olympics and Christians

When the 2008 Olympics were awarded to China back in 2001, there was a naive hope that this decision would change China and also lead to an improvement in human rights. It turns out that instead of changing China, it may have changed us.

One example of this can be seen in our country. When the Olympic torch was carried through various cities in the world, it was protected not only by the local authorities but also by the Chinese secret police. So when the torch came to San Francisco, once again the Chinese secret police showed up. Now to be fair, the news reports actually said that they were volunteers from the Special Forces academy of the Peoples Armed Police. But a better description for them would be Chinas secret police.

This organization has been used to protect embassies in Beijing. But it has also been called upon put down protests in Tibet and suppress protests and other forms of expression in China. They were described by the chairman of the 2012 London Olympic committee as thugs. Others described their tactics as aggressive.

It is amazing to me that we allowed these secret police in our country, but it illustrates my point. We thought that these trade overtures and the Olympics would change China. In the long run, they may have a positive impact. But so far it seems like we are the ones who have changed.

There was also the naive hope that bringing the Olympics to China would usher in an era of improved human rights in this communist country. It appears that in some ways the situation is worse. China has invested time and money in preparing for the Olympics. It appears they have also done all they can to rid the nation of anyone who could be seen as a dissident.

For decades, China has been rounding up Christians and other dissidents. They have been beaten and thrown in jail. Some have been killed. Lord David Alton estimates that each year 8,000 executions take place in China. Those who escape this persecution must live in a society where political and religious opinion is repressed, where journalists are jailed, and where the Internet and overseas broadcasts are censored.

The Chinese constitution promises its citizens that they have freedom of religious belief. But we know better. While there is an official state church, most of the growth (and the perceived potential threat to the government) takes place in the underground churches. As we get closer to the Olympics, the government seems bent on doing more to smash the growing home church movement.

As Christians we should be in prayer about what is taking place in China. But a growing debate has centered on what the U.S. government should do. Some have called for President Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies. They believe this would be a strong statement of our repudiation of the practices of the Chinese government. Others have suggested that President Bush go and use the Olympics as a platform to speak out against the Chinese government.

I see merit in either action. What is unacceptable is the current policy of silence. The president, his administration, and even corporate sponsors have been silent about what has been going on for decades. Now even the secular world is calling for action because of Chinas policy toward Tibet. It is time for all of us (Christians included) to break our

silence and speak out.

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# Myanmar Cyclone Response: Power-Lust and Lost Lives

*As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.*

## Corrupted Power

### Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives “without enough to eat” on a normal basis.<sup>{1}</sup> The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. “Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and

corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems. However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

## **Failure to Allow Rendered Aid**

"The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar's cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food," reports the Associated Press.

It's understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

*Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.*

*Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.*

*Government demands of businesses in the capital to "donate" aid for victims to be distributed through the central government.[\[3\]](#) So much for central "planning." Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.*

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in need the very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling party's priorities.

## **Global Chorus of Criticism**

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.[\[4\]](#)

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.[\[5\]](#)

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is

deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country very quickly, we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he said.<sup>[6]</sup>

The UN has learned lessons from past dictatorships' abuse of privilege. The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

## **Some Worldview Implications**

The heartlessness of Myanmar's leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldview—neo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for example—would only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or "smart enough" to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dalai Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaigning. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For

Burmese monks and adherents alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, "According to Buddhist belief, man is worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God" [\[7\]](#). While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan's Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism's doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, "Why? From where does this universal reality spring?"

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. "The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand." [\[8\]](#) Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

## **Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity**

"A Christian view of government should...be concerned with human rights...based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but

instead acknowledges these rights as always existing.”{9}

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America’s reaction to Myanmar’s languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world’s stance: the ideals of democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I’m sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. Americas Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

## **Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power**

“While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil.... {10} Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this



traditioninevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.[\[11\]](#)

## **Sanctity of Human Life**

What officials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestige as in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that today's outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as God's image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

## **Biblical Imitation of a Giving God**

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive response however incompetent it may have been from the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Church's centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world,

that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

## Notes

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# Clonaid and Eternity

Want to live forever?

Got big bucks?

Clonaid founder Claude Vorilhon, who goes by “Rael,” says you’ll be able to gain eternal life through cloning, but it will cost you plenty. Debates surrounding Clonaid sometimes overlook his stated goal.

“The long-term implication, and this is my mission,” Rael told CNN, “is to give humanity eternal life. Cloning is the key to give us eternal life and to cure all disease on Earth, but eternal life is the ultimate goal.”

Rael says cloning babies is only the first step. Next, he speculates, will come “accelerated growth,” bringing a cloned infant to maturity over a few hours. Phase three transfers the data in your brain to your adult clone.

Your memory and personality then inhabit a new body. Your old body can die while you live on. When your cloned body wears out, presumably you can repeat the process and thus live forever. Hopes of connecting with eternity, of course, touch deep human longings.

Rael, who founded the Raelian religion, says he won't profit directly from the cloning. Clonaid and the Raelian religion seem to be close philosophically but separate financially. Clonaid's website features Rael quite prominently. Rael says he won't shun donations from Clonaid.

Referring to Clonaid president Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, Rael says, "It's a commercial company and her goal is to make as much money as possible, and I hope she will make as much as possible."

Hmmm. A religious leader; big money; questionable promises. Sound fishy?

Rael says he encountered a space alien in 1973 in France who told him that extraterrestrials had created life on Earth through cloning. Rael's mission became to spread the aliens' message and help earthlings live forever.

Rael claims the alien told him he (Rael) was the brother of Jesus. Jesus, of course, said some significant things about eternal life. Among them: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish."

Jesus also said that his own bodily resurrection – one of the best-attested facts in history – would validate his claims. Raelians say that aliens using "an advanced cloning technique" raised Jesus from the dead. One problem with this theory involves Jesus' wounds. To convince his doubting disciple Thomas he had really risen, Jesus showed him the wounds in his hands and side. Thomas believed. Presumably cloning, involving genetic copying, does not reproduce physical wounds.

Jesus and his followers charged nothing for eternal life. It was a "free gift" to all who believed, made possible by his sacrificial death.

Beware of religious leaders promising eternity for a fee.

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# The Problem With Evangelicals

Do you consider yourself an Evangelical? Do you know what the term means? For some, Evangelical has come to represent all that is wrong with religion, especially its intersection with politics and power. For others, the word depicts the centuries-old tradition that holds in high esteem the best attributes of the Christian faith across a wide spectrum of denominations and movements. As a result, one never quite knows what response to expect when a conversation about evangelicals is started.

Darrell Bock, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, recently wrote an editorial for the *Dallas Morning News* to try and help outsiders better understand what evangelicals believe and hope to accomplish. Drawing from the recently published document [\*An Evangelical Manifesto\*](#), Bock emphasized the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ, the desire for a civil public square that recognizes and protects religious freedom and tolerance, and a call for evangelicals to engage in serious self-examination and repentance. Evangelicals are united by their theology and the central role that the Bible plays in forming it. That doesn't mean that we agree on every aspect of doctrine, but we share the good news of salvation in Christ that the Bible teaches. In fact, the label *evangelical* comes from a Greek word for the good news or *gospel* that is found in the New Testament.

The newspaper quickly printed a few responses to Dr. Bock's piece that show just how difficult it can be to change people's perceptions. One reader wrote that evangelicals are defined by total opposition to abortion and rejection of

homosexuals and their agenda. And although Dr. Bock specifically mentioned that evangelicals do not want to create a government ruled by God or by religious leaders, she added that evangelicals would be happy with a theocracy. It seems odd when a person says, "Here is what I believe," and someone else replies, "No you don't; you really believe *this*."

Another reader wrote that when evangelicals accept another's faith as equally valid as their own, progress will have been made.<sup>[1]</sup> This criticism reflects America's difficulty with the highly valued virtue of tolerance. The assumption is that if one resides in a pluralistic society, then all views must carry equal weight in the culture and that none can claim to have a privileged perspective on truth. It is assumed that in a tolerant society everyone would agree on all ethical issues and would accept all religions as equally valid. The first comment seems to be saying that if you are like Christ, you will condemn nothing. The second portrays the idea that tolerance requires the acceptance of all religious ideas, even if they contradict one another.

How does a Christian who values the virtue of tolerance respond to these accusations? As *An Evangelical Manifesto* describes, we are not arguing for a *sacred public square*, a society in which only one set of religious ideas or solutions are considered. But neither do we believe that a *secular public square* is in our nation's best interests. Our hope is to have a **civil public square**, one in which true tolerance is practiced. When understood correctly, tolerance allows for a civil dialogue between competing and even contradictory positions on important topics in order that the best solution eventually finds favor.

Traditionally, tolerance has meant that one puts up with an act or idea that he or she disagrees with for the sake of a greater good. In fact, it quickly becomes obvious that unless there is a disagreement, tolerance cannot even occur. We can only tolerate, or bear with something, when we first disagree

with it. In a tolerant society people will bear with those they disagree with hoping to make a case for their view that will influence future policies and actions. Abortion and homosexuality are issues that divide our nation deeply. However, a tolerant response to the conflict is not to force everyone to agree with one viewpoint but rather to put up, or bear with, the opposition while making a case for your view. The greater good is a civil public square and the opportunity to change hearts and minds concerning what is healthiest for America's future, and what we consider to be a morally superior view based on God's Word.

Christians need to practice tolerance towards one another as well for the greater good of unity and showing the world an example of Christian love. *An Evangelical Manifesto* has been criticized by some within the church because it has been favorably commented on by people of other faiths. The assumption is that if a Hindu finds something good about this document, those who wrote it must not be Christian enough. This guilt by association fails to deal with the ideas in the document fairly. It also ignores the times in scripture that we are told to bear with one another (Romans 15:1, Colossians 3:13).

*An Evangelical Manifesto* may not be a perfect document, but it is a helpful step in explaining to the watching world what we Christians are about. It brings the focus back to the Gospel of Christ and an emphasis on living a Christlike life. It reminds us that we have a message of grace and forgiveness to share, not one of law and legalism.

## Notes

1. Dallas Morning News, May 13, 2008

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# Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

## “How Sweet the Sound”

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound),” Newton wrote, “That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”<sup>{1}</sup> He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.<sup>{2}</sup> My university roommate and I used to try to see how many

different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.<sup>{3}</sup> Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

## Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."<sup>{4}</sup> At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."<sup>{5}</sup> He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.<sup>{6}</sup>

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.<sup>{7}</sup> Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."<sup>{8}</sup>

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated

with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. “We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied.”{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, “to pass away the time”—an edition of Thomas à Kempis’ classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, “What if these things were true?” Dismayed, he “shut the book quickly.” {12} Newton called himself a terrible “blasphemer” who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”{15}

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we’ll see.

## **From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor**

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and

behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.{17}

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. [I concluded](#) that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable." {18}

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.{19}

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a

business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.[{21}](#)

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.[{22}](#) Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

## Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.[{23}](#) His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.[{24}](#)

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.[{25}](#) During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel,

who, Newton said, “trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him.”[{26}](#)

Newton’s biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me,” he wrote, “that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”[{27}](#) His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.[{28}](#) Jonathan Aitken says, “Newton’s testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause.”[{29}](#)

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

## **Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace**

John Newton encountered “many dangers, toils, and snares” on his life’s voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

*Moral maturation can take time.* Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable,

but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

*Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life.* He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"[\[30\]](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."[\[31\]](#)

*Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life.* For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[\[32\]](#)

*Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence.* Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[\[33\]](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[\[34\]](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[\[35\]](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."[\[36\]](#)

## Notes

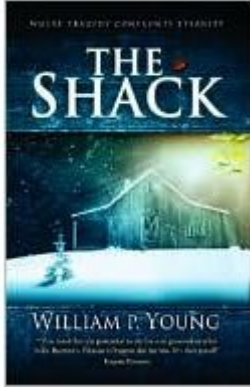
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2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.
3. Aitken, op. cit.
4. Newton, op. cit., 24.
5. Ibid., 33.
6. Ibid., 34.
7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.
8. Ibid., 44-45.
9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.
10. Newton, op. cit., 60.
11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.
12. Newton, op. cit., 69.
13. Ibid., 65, 68.
14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.
15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.
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17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.



18. Ibid., 112.
19. Ibid., 125-126.
20. Ibid., 127-137.
21. Ibid., 140-141.
22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.
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25. Ibid., 310 ff.
26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.
27. Ibid., 319.
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32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
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# Response to “The Shack”



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel, [\[1\]](#) for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read [“Is The Shack Heresy?”](#) by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It’s a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It’s signed “Papa,” his wife’s favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*, [\[2\]](#) where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character’s questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of “How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?”

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don't read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn't have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my "wisdom journal," a book I've been adding to for years with wisdom from others that I didn't want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn't. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about "doing Christianity." It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

## **Fresh Insights**

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

- God is warm and inviting
- He collects our tears in a bottle
- Jesus was not particularly handsome
- God is one, in three Persons
- The Holy Spirit is a comforter
- There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
- God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation
- God values what is given from the heart
- God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God

- God is compassionate toward the anguished question, “How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?”
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ
- The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled
- There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
- How good triumphs over evil
- The nature and purpose of the Law
- The healing nature of God’s love
- Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
- God’s omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
- In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

## How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as “a large, beaming, African-American woman” (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa’s reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

*“Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so*

*easily back into your religious conditioning.”*

*She leaned forward as if to share a secret. “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.”*

*. . . She looked at Mack intently. “Hasn’t it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you’ve been through, you couldn’t very well handle a father right now, could you?”*

*He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful. (pp. 93-94)*

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack’s heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of “God is our Mother” garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

## **Deep Ministry**

On his personal [website](#), the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to “kill our independence” (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God’s love looks like. I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn’t just love me, He *likes* me.

## An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

*“We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. . . What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense to us.” (p. 122)*

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

*“We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.” (p. 145)*

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *serving*. God submitting to His creation? I don’t think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with

husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack*, one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

## Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, “If you’ll let me, I’ll be the Papa you never had.” (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God’s eyes when they meet face to face, who can’t give themselves permission to rest from their “hamster treadmill” for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ’s bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant,

grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God's heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only "Christianity from the neck up," but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

## Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*. Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

## Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that "boys express affection aggressively."

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best "take-away" of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people's hostility toward the book isn't about what it actually says, it's about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like "heresy" and "dangerous" to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it's important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original



intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife's urging, "You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God." He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young's "out of the box" theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a "slice of God," so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul's view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—"Gandalf with an attitude," as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking "What is the author using this imagery to portray?" is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe

in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the [heart of El-Shaddai \("the breasted one"\)](#). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father's and the Spirit's hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul's children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn't know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

*The Shack* presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually

have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise seminarian told me, "We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy."

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people's understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile

toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It's a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree. In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that's important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. "Controversies don't bother me," this wise believer said. "I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis, time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it."

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals', and it troubled me. As I prayed, "Lord, what's up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective," I believe He answered me: "He doesn't get everything right." Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn't get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don't know what our blind spots are and we don't know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with "getting your theological beliefs right." And not "getting everything right" is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this "heretical" book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is

that He knows Paul Young doesn't get everything right, and He's using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there's something to be said for that.

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