The Great Light

“A myriad of men are born; they labor and struggle and sweat for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for mean little advantages over each other. Age creeps upon them and infirmities follow; shame and humiliation bring down their pride and vanities.

“Those they love are taken from them, and the job of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care, misery, grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead; longing for relief is in its place.

“It comes at last . . . the only unpoisoned gift earth has for them . . . and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence, where they achieved nothing, where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they left no sign that they had ever existed—a world that will lament them a day and forget them forever.”

Mark Twain, who penned these words in his autobiography, reveals a pessimistic heart about the value and meaning of human life. For Twain, people do not live; they merely exist. And to no good purpose. Life is drudgery, and increasingly so, as the years fly past.

But two thousand years ago a bright star arose over tiny Bethlehem to protest such a despairing view of life. As it sparkled in the desert night, some took notice, pondering its significance. By following it to an obscure manger, they found their own. They drew near to warm themselves at the radiant glory which enveloped the little newborn on the straw. This **Great Light** had come at last to dispel the darkness and meaninglessness of human life.

The special glow experienced at Christmas Season transcends all gift giving and family festivity. It is something more, a cosmic celebration which unites us in spirit and praise with

that first tiny band of worshippers who discovered on that ancient night that people have significance *only* if God gives it to them. The presence of the Christ Child is the tangible evidence—for them and for us—that God has actually **done so**! The "unreachable" God has reached us.

The shimmering, Bethlehem Star over that ancient stable dramatizes God's act of penetrating the darkness of human existence. "He loved the world. . . . He gave his Son." And if human life is without significance and value, as Mark Twain suggests, God would hardly have bothered. But He did. He "bothered" to the point of total identification with humanity as a real flesh and blood man.

The heart of the Christmas message is one of affirming human worth and the exquisite price God paid to prove it—the death of His dear Son. Every day, every Sunday, every Christmas, with bread and cup, millions of believers . . . remember and remember. "Lament them a day and forget them forever?" Impossible! His life and death give meaning to our own. We remember . . . and rejoice . . . and our lives are filled with meaning as we continue to warm ourselves at the hearth of His cheerful and abiding presence.

God bless you as we celebrate His birth this year!

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The First Christmas Wreath

A sure sign of the approaching Christmas Season is the appearance of brightly colored wreaths which adorn the front doors of countless dwellings around the world. These gaily

decorated reminders get us ready to commemorate again the wondrous birth of Christ our Savior.

Christmas is a time of warmth and celebration. A blazing fireplace, the smell of pine, a brightly lit tree with gifts spilling out in every direction, the sense of families drawing closer, shining smiles of eager youngsters—these and a myriad of other personal touches and traditions make this a most special time of the year.

But ironically, this joyous season becomes also a time of stress and dread for many. Stress and dread caused by endless traffic and irritating crowds, financial tensions, anxiety in the choice and cost of gifts for others, fractured families who shuttle children back and forth and spend more time awkwardly carving up a schedule than they do the turkey, Rolaids and ruined toys, traffic deaths and body counts, loneliness, alienation, depression, and fatigue.

Such is the bitter/sweet nature of Christmas. And yet these very feelings of lostness and despair are what Christmas is really all about. Because its celebration flows out of divine consolation. Little Immanuel has come to identify Himself with a fallen humanity. To share our pain and give us hope.

He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. . . . As a teenager He experienced the death of Joseph, His human father. As eldest son He knew backbreaking labor and the weight of the responsibility to provide for His household. His ministry and mission were misunderstood by His loved ones. He faced the humiliating accusation of illegitimacy all of His life. And accepted His betrayal by a friend. He patiently bore the hostility and the taunts of His enemies, and also the injustice of being wrongly accused. He humbly submitted to arrest, torture, and the cruelest of deaths. He died of a broken heart.

“Sure He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” says

the Prophet Isaiah. “We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tested in all ways as we are,” notes the writer of the book of Hebrews. He understands. He lived as we live. He died and rose again that we might *really* live. Christmas, then, is a celebration of life for God’s people, a time of triumphant rejoicing and praise. We can wholeheartedly do so because *our Savior has come.* His suffering has brought freedom and hope to us all.

Why can we celebrate each year with the Christmas wreath? Because He *wore* the **first** one—**a crown of thorns.**

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Jonah in the Whale – An Actual Event Pointed to by Jesus Christ

Probe founder Jimmy Williams considers the question: was Jonah a real man experiencing real events or is it an allegorical story? Upon examining Jesus’ use of the book, the testimony of first century commentators, and the characteristics of modern day whales and fish, he concludes that Jonah is a record of actual events.

The book of Jonah—is it history, allegory, or romance? Was he really swallowed by a great fish as Scripture records? Or was he even a real person? Did he really go to Nineveh and preach so effectively that an entire city repented and escaped divine judgment? These are important questions that not only involve the integrity of Scripture, but that of our Lord Jesus Christ, who referred to Jonah as a real person.

Like the Sadducees of Jesus' day who rejected all things "miraculous" (Remember their question posed to Jesus about the woman who married seven brothers one after the other and their concern about whose wife she would be in the resurrection in Luke 20:33?), modern scholars have had a field day with this book. Here is an example:

> *The Book of Jonah is unlike any of the other prophetic books in that it is not primarily a record of the utterances of the prophet. Rather it is a short story, clearly fictional. The hallmarks of fiction rest in its anachronisms and its elements of fantasy. . . . Since the book is fiction, it would be best to consider the "great fish" an element of fantasy, a mythological monster, and let it go at that. . . .Popularly, Jonah's fish is considered to have been a whale. . . . If it was a whale that swallowed Jonah, then we are left with the fact that the only type of whale with a throat large enough to swallow a man is the sperm whale. . . . Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean and, in the course of nature, it is completely unlikely that a man should be swallowed by one there, or still further, survive three days and nights of incarceration. . . . All difficulties disappear, however, if it is remembered that the Book of Jonah is a fantasy.{1}*

Always keep in mind that a large proportion of all modern criticism of the Bible comes from one philosophical presupposition: **miracles do not occur.** Locked into this naturalistic view of reality, it is not surprising that skeptical theologians encounter difficulties throughout the Bible. Given their premise, every miracle in Scripture must be explained away by either tacit rejection, in in the previous quotation, or by giving the "miracle" some feasible, naturalistic explanation. Their attempts to accomplish this throughout the Bible are often so ludicrous, varied, and contradictory, that we turn with relief back to the Bible, preferring the miraculous to the ridiculous!

This always reminds me of the illustration Dr. Norman Geisler alludes to in his many debates: A man visited a psychiatrist to share a problem which greatly concerned him.
“Doctor, I have a terrible problem.”
“Please tell me about it,” said the doctor.
“Well, I believe that I am dead.”
“Hmmmm, that is a heavy concern. May I ask you a question?”
“Of course,” replied the man.
“Do you believe that dead men bleed?”
“Of course not. That’s preposterous,” said the patient.
The psychiatrist reached over and picked up a long hat pin, took the man’s hand, and pricked his finger with it. As the blood began to flow, the man stared at his finger and exclaimed, “Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!”

The real question is not, “Are miracles possible?” but rather, “**Does God Exist**?”

The Bible declares that “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Those who prefer this presupposition (and there is good reason to prefer it) acknowledge that God has, and can activate, for His Sovereign purposes, the prerogative to intervene, to override the natural laws of the universe created by His Hand.

Historical Considerations

Jonah 1:1 declares, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai.”

Is there any other biblical evidence that Jonah was a real person? Yes. In 2 Kings 14:25 we read, “He (king Jeroboam II of Israel) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet which was by (from) Gath-hepher.”

Here we discover that Jonah gave a prophetic word concerning this king, Jeroboam, the greatest and longest-reigning monarch of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Substantial archeological data has been recovered concerning Jeroboam (II) from the city of Samaria (the royal Capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Megiddo, including a jasper seal by Schumacher and inscribed, "Shema, servant of Jeroboam."{2}

The reference in 2 Kings also informs us as to the time Jonah lived and ministered. It is thought by some that Jonah may have been numbered among the "schools of the prophets" and was a contemporary of Elisha the Prophet (eighth century B.C.)

With respect to the narrative itself, there is no indication within it, nor among any of the early Judaic traditions that would suggest that it is not historical. Interestingly enough, during the third century B.C., the time which most modern critics assert the book of Jonah was composed, we discover one of the fourteen books of the Apocrypha, the Book of Tobit, makes mention of Jonah. The Apocryphal books are those included in the Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant Bible. They were early considered "suspect" for one reason or another and were not regarded by the Jews as canonical. However, they do have historical and literary merit for biblical studies. Tobit, addressing death-bed comments to his son, Tobias, says: "Go into Media, my child; for I surely believe all the things which **Jonah the prophet spake of Nineveh**, that it shall be overthrown."{3}

Two Jewish writers of the first century A.D., Philo, the philosopher, and Josephus, the historian, also consider Jonah to be an historical book. And one of the most prominent biblical scenes found in the Catacombs of Rome is of Jonah and his Fish . . . no doubt for the hope of resurrection symbolized by the book, and confirmed by Christ.

Jesus

In Matthew 12:39-40 Jesus says, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonas; for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whales’s belly, so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Here Jesus refers to Jonah and his experience as historical. Critics have offered the explanation, based on their “no miracles” presupposition, that Jesus (actually aware that it was really a myth) merely *accommodated* Himself to the naïve perspective of His first century, unsophisticated hearers, as someone might refer to King Lear or Don Quixote.

But this is not the *only* mention of Jonah by our Lord. He goes on to say in Matthew 12 about Nineveh: “The men of Nineveh shall stand up with *this* generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (v. 41).

Here Jesus is comparing and linking the real people listening to His words (“this generation”) with the generation of Jonah’s day and foresees the Day when both groups will be evaluated and *judged* on the basis of how they responded to the divine light given them in their day! The *context* does not allow an inference that one generation is parabolic and the other historical. It does not allow for the “accommodation” theory of the modern critics. With these words in Matthew 12, Christ clearly confirms the historicity of the book of Jonah.

Whale or Fish?

The Bible doesn’t say that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Only the King James Version of 1611 does that. Jonah 1:17 says “God prepared a great fish (*dag gadol*),” not a great whale. And the Matthew passage (12:40) in Greek refers to the animal

as a “sea monster” (*ketos*), not a whale. It may or may not have been a whale. Let’s explore the possibilities, beginning with the question of “*Could* it happen?” Are there marine creatures capable of swallowing a human being?

Whales

There are two basic types of whales if differentiated by their mouth and throat structures: *baleen*, and *non-baleen* (toothed whales).

Baleen whales are by far the most numerous species in the oceans and include the Blue, Gray, Humpback, and Right (Bowhead). All of these whales are distinguished by the presence of a baleen “curtain” or “strainer” in their mouths. They have a very small throat (like a funnel) and feed by straining krill, plankton, and small crustaceans as they swim through the water with their mouths open. It would be impossible for any of these whales to swallow a human, so they can be ruled out.

The “toothed” whales can be given some consideration. These include the dolphin, porpoise, Beluga, Narwhal, Orca (Killer whale), none of which is large enough to swallow a whole human being, and the Sperm whale, which definitely *is.*

The Sperm whale is the largest of the toothed whales, adult males measuring over sixty feet in length (walk into your garage and multiply the length by four!). They are most prominent in the Pacific Ocean, but not unknown in the Atlantic and a favorite of Norwegian whalers. This whale’s diet consists of giant squid, large sea-bottom and mid-water sharks, skates, and fishes.{4}

The Sperm whale has a *huge* capacity in its gullet to store food. In his book, *Sixty-three Years of Engineering,* Sir Francis Fox tells of a manager of a whaling station who indicates that the whale can “swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter, and that in one of these whales they actually

found ‘the skeleton of a shark sixteen feet in length.'{5}

In the *Daily Mail* of December 14th, 1928, Mr. G. H. Henn, a resident of Birmingham, England recounted the following story:

> *My own experience . . . about twenty-five years ago, when the carcass of a whale was displayed for a week on vacant land in Navigation Street, outside New Street station . . . I was one of twelve men, who went into its mouth, passed through its throat, and moved about in what was equivalent to a fair-sized room. It’s throat was large enough to serve as a door. Obviously it would be quite easy for a whale of this kind to swallow a man.”{6}*

This could only have been a sperm whale. On the coast of England, Mr. Frank Bullen in his book, *The Cruise of the Cachalot* (another name for the Sperm whale), notes that the *sperm whale always ejects the contents of its stomach when dying*. He himself witnessed such an incident and described the huge masses of regurgitated contents, estimating their size as about “eight feet by six feet into six feet, the total equal to the bodies of six stout men compressed into one!”{7}

It is argued that Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean. But who is to say that was the case 2800 years ago? There are a lot of marine creatures not found today due to the intense, world-wide fishing pressure of the past 300 years. If a Sperm whale beached itself on the west coast of England in this century, who’s to say a Sperm whale might not have found its way into the Mediterranean? We know all whales migrate toward warm water to bear their young. One would also suspect that if a Sperm whale did find itself east of Gibraltar, it probably would not fare well in the shallower depths and could well be very hungry! [One story has circulated for years about the whale ship *Star of the East*, which lost a sailor named James Bartley. The story is that he was swallowed by a large sperm whale, and found alive inside

the whale's stomach when it was killed and brought aboard. Mr. Bartley was found unconscious and with his skin bleached by the whale's gastric acid, but alive nonetheless. We have just discovered that this is, regrettably, an urban legend, and therefore cannot be used to support our argument. Here is a link to the debunking of this urban legend: http://www.ship-of-fools.com/Myths/04Myth.html]

Other Prospects

Baxter also notes a more recent incident:

We have come across the following news-item in the Madras (India) *Mail* of November 28th, 1946:

> *Bombay, November 26. — A twelve-foot tiger shark, weighing 700 lbs., was dragged ashore last evening at the Sasson Docks. When the shark was cut open a skeleton and a man's clothes were found. It is thought that the victim may have been one of those lost at sea during the recent cyclone. The shark was caught by fishermen thirty miles from Bombay.*

The Tiger is a medium-size shark. The Great White is much larger, over thirty feet in length and weighing four tons. This shark has attacked swimmers all along the Atlantic seaboard on both sides of the ocean.

Which bring us to another important point: It *is* possible that Jonah actually *did* die. There are several indications in chapter 2 (vs. 2, 5, 6). There are also several miracles recorded in this book: God preparing the great fish, the hearts of the people of Nineveh, the gourd plant, the east wind. If Jonah did die in chapter 2, another miracle involving his resuscitation after the watery sojourn would not be anymore difficult for God to perform than the other miracles in the book. God chides Abraham when he doubts a child could come forth from the deadness of Sarah's womb and says, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). In Genesis

or Jonah the answer is the same: “No.”

If Jonah actually did die, this simply records one more person among the several in Scripture who were resuscitated for God’s intended purpose, and it makes Jonah a still more remarkable type of Christ and His resurrection . . . which is without a doubt the *main* reason this little book is included in the Sacred Canon!

The main *personal* application of the Book of Jonah is simply this: **Before God can *use* the prophet, He must first *break* the prophet!**

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm strengthen, and establish you. . . . Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” (1 Pet. 5:10, 6).

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Education: The Three-Legged Stool

In the late 80’s when the Communist walls were coming down in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, columnist Jack Anderson commented: “I don’t mean to minimize the Soviet danger, but while spending trillions of dollars on the military, we’ve completely neglected our economic defenses, while the Japanese have been assaulting our economic citadel . . . Japan is a nation of engineers and producers. We’re a nation of lawyers and consumers. Japan sacrifices today for tomorrow. And we sacrifice tomorrow for today.”

After the Revolutions, the possibility of armed aggression (time will tell) upon the U. S. seems at present even more remote than Anderson noted. But the second part of his comment focuses upon the present concerns of the Clinton Administration and others with respect to America's flagging educational endeavors. That is, we are told we must upgrade learning at all levels so we might again compete economically with Japan and the European Community and reclaim our "rightful" place as "Number 1" in the world.

Competition is a healthy thing to a point. But I submit that whatever Herculean measures undertaken by educational agencies might actually produce the mathematicians, engineers, and scientists needed to bring us back up to global "par," we would still be woefully short of proper educational goals for the nation. The educational crisis of the 90's has shown to be a supreme failure, as it is driven mostly by economic concerns, ignoring Jesus' reminder that man simply cannot live by bread alone. We must therefore insist that the educational establishment do something beyond cranking out human "hardware"—graduates who perform acceptably in the market place in the production of competitive goods and services, but have chests with no hearts.

It is one thing to teach young Americans how to make a living; it is quite another to teach them how to live. This is the "software" part of the educational process. The tension between intellectual and moral development in educating the young is as old as civilization. Aristotle spoke keenly to this point in the fourth century B.C. when he said,

> *"Intellectual virtue is for the most part produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit . . . . The virtues we acquire by first having practiced them, just as we do the arts. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits, or another; on the contrary it is of very*

great, or rather of supreme, importance."

The real question educationists must answer was posed by Jack Fraenkel: "It appears important to consider, therefore, whether we want values to develop in students accidentally or whether we intend to deliberately influence their value development in directions we consider desirable." It goes without saying that the "values clarification" approach of today never intends to accomplish the latter, and there is no guarantee that even the former is being achieved among today's young!

Our Founding Fathers faced clearly the necessity of providing an educational experience that encompassed both the cognitive and moral spheres. As early as 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, setting aside land for educational purposes with these words: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

This three-legged stool upon which children could learn and a vibrant, strong society could be built encompassed the inter-relatedness and necessary cooperation of the church, the home, and the school. Sadly, today the "stool" is largely missing a couple of legs. And the third (public education) has assigned to itself (with our increasing encouragement) the task of providing all three! This is neither possible, nor is it desirable. By its very nature, pluralistic public education dictates a methodological approach that of necessity dilutes religious and moral teaching to abstract speculation with no direction or call for personal commitment to a point of view. Rather, the goal is simply that everyone should *have* a point of view! The paralysis of this approach with respect to religion and moral values spills over to the knowledge "leg" as well. Deprived of metaphysical and moral certitude, information proliferates and expands like so much pizza dough;

it is swung wildly around classrooms, but it won't stick to anything!

No wonder learning is such a chore, such uninteresting, laborious work for our sons and daughters. Bombarded with information, many youngsters face life on "perpetual overload," stunted and numbed in the process because they lack the intellectual, skeletal framework upon which they can separate and arrange the truly important from the trivial.

We who have children must increasingly look to ourselves to remedy this situation. And we are in good company. Most of the best education throughout history has not occurred in public educational arenas. Its has emerged from the hearts of caring parents who refuse to sacrifice their children upon the altars of popular educational notions and experiments. Dr. Ronald Nash's penetrating analysis of this struggle in *The Closing of the American Heart* charts a path that you and I can follow in identifying the real roots of the American educational crisis and what to do about it.

> *"And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:6-9*

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From Fig Leaves to Fur Coats

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys don’t!” is one of the greatest conceptual heresies today. Probably most of us at one time or another have undergone the ordeal of having a Sunday school teacher point a bony finger at us and carp away at our inappropriate conduct, warning us of the ultimate outcome of such behavior.

This Santa Claus mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice,” to “find out who’s naughty or nice.” The conclusion we are supposed to reach is that our good deeds and our bad deeds are being placed on the divine scales and will be weighed at the tine of our physical death to see if we go “up” or “down.” This suggested approach to God is diametrically opposed to that which Jesus affirmed as the right approach.

The most righteous men of Jesus’ day were the Pharisees. In order to be a Pharisee, you had to be “Mr. Clean.” The Pharisees knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day, and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and exposed their spiritual bankruptcy to the thronging crowds with such statements as, “Except your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of God”(Matthew 5:20).

“The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment: “You mean the Pharisees aren’t righteous enough to make it? If they can’t make it, who can?”

What a moment in history! A radical young man dares to suggest that the most righteous and moral men of the ancient Jewish community are not righteous enough to make themselves presentable before God. In fact, Jesus said they were hypocrites! He informed them they were wrong to claim they

were righteous enough to assume that all was well between them and their Maker. When you are well, you don't need a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick.

Jesus was pressing the Pharisees to be honest with themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13).

A Mildewed Fig

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! Most of us don't know what sin really is, nor do we understand what a sinner is. A sinner is one who has violated the law of God.

Many assert that they try to live by the Ten Commandments, or by some other rule of life. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers that we have violated these standards at some point. These codes of behavior are to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the condition of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only *reveal* to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us of sin.

The Pharisee looked at the Law and then at his life and said, "I'm well." Jesus desired them to come up with exactly the opposite conclusion. A person must know he needs help before he will seek it. Everyone has this sin disease. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in humans. There is a great deal of good. The point is merely that this relative human goodness is unacceptable to God.

In Russia they print and circulate rubles, and with those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill and buy things in the shops. But if you took those rubles across the Atlantic Ocean and brought them to America, they would be

worthless currency.

Debased Coinage

So it is with our characters, our lives. . . all that we have outside of Christ. A person may be a millionaire in character, and that might buy him a high position in this world, but when he crosses the great divide between this life and the next, his character is a debased coinage, and God in His Holiness cannot accept it at all.

It is important than individual comprehends the fact that there are *two* kinds of righteousness. There is a righteousness of men, and a righteousness of God. The apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee, finally recognized these two distinct types of righteousness when he said that the desire of his life was to "be found in Him, not having my *own* righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

He saw clearly the predicament of his Jewish brethren when he wrote with a broken heart to the Romans, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for god, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of *God's* righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:1-4).

Failing "Home Economics 101"

In the Old Testament account of Adam and Eve, there is a vivid imagery of these two kinds of righteousness. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they hid in the bushes in shame. They took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to clothe themselves with some kind of garment or covering. God came walking in the cool of the garden, desiring

His regular fellowship with them, but Adam was in the bushes with Eve. . .flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the flimsy, pathetic clusters of fig leaves which had been hastily sewn together by the guilty couple, and in short, thoroughly censored their effort.

The account goes on to say that God took animals and made garments from their skins for Adam and Eve. While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very beginning that man, in his own efforts, does not have the ability to make himself presentable before God.

It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver… trying to clothe himself … but the silkworm's activity spins him a shroud."

So it is with man. Philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, or any other system which seeks to gain the approval of God is the "fig leaf" approach. This was the error of those fellow Israelites for whom Paul grieved, those who were trying to establish their own righteousness, without recognizing that another kind of righteousness was available them by faith: ". . .and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, lest any man should boast"(Ephesians 2:8,9). "Works" righteousness is what religion is all about. Works righteousness is spelled **"DO!"** "Faith" righteousness is what Christianity is all about. Faith righteousness is spelled **"DONE!"** Jesus cried triumphantly from the cross, "It is finished!" The work which the Father had given Him to do was completed at the cross. A bridge, a way of access—by His sacrificial death—had been constructed between God and man, and it was now open for business.

That is why the cross is so important to each individual. If one can find God through his own efforts and good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake at Calvary. He allowed His Son to die a substitutionary death for the world that was not truly needed. The choices of approaching God are then left to each

person. One can accept the death of Christ on his behalf, or he must pay with his own death. How presumptuous for anyone to think himself qualified to provide salvation for himself when the standard each must meet is God's perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that no one can reach it. The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one mile deep. The world's record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 Olympics, is 29′ 4 ".

Yet the chances of a man jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than the chance of a man establishing fellowship with God through his own efforts.

A "God-Original"

What God has to offer is *free*. It is a gift which is not deserved by any man, nor could any man ever *repay* what the gift is worth. Man has been dealt with in grace and love. The only thing that man is asked to do is acknowledge that he has broken the laws of God, to acknowledge that God made things right through His son at the cross, and accept His forgiveness.

He is requested to lay aside his own fig-leaf garment and to be clothed with a "God-original" garment made possible by the slaying of the Lamb. God wants to clothe every person with the righteousness of *Christ.*

This is what Jesus was referring to in a parable concerning a wedding feast which a king was having for his son: "So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad:* and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, Friend, how come you are here not having a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the King to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be

weeping and gnashing of teeth!'" (Matthew 22:1-13).

In a society where the hue and cry is "take it off¾take it all off," it is ironic that God is saying the very same thing. He does not want us to cover ourselves—to hide what we really are. He wants us to acknowledge what we are and accept with a thankful heart what He has provided in Christ.

As a gracious Host, He stands there holding the most costly garment in the universe—the righteousness of Jesus Christ—and He eagerly desires to wrap *you* up in it, safe and warm and happy and secure:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10)

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Apologetics and Evangelism

Probe's founder Jimmy Williams, a master in classical apologetics, explores the use of apologetics in sharing the gospel.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Today as never before, Christians are being called upon to give reasons for the hope that is within them. Often in the evangelistic context seekers raise questions about the validity of the gospel message. Removing intellectual

objections will not make one a Christian; a change of heart wrought by the Spirit is also necessary. But though intellectual activity is insufficient to bring another to Christ, it does not follow that it is also unnecessary. In this essay we will examine the place and purpose of apologetics in the sharing of our faith with others.

The word “apologetics” never actually appears in the Bible. But there is a verse which contains its meaning:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give *an answer* to every man who asketh you the reason for the hope that is within you with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15).

The Greek word *apologia* means “answer,” or “reasonable defense.” It does not mean to apologize, nor does it mean just to engage in intellectual dialogue. It means to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

The verse thus suggests that the *manner* in which one does apologetics is as important as the words expressed. And Peter tells us in this passage that Christians are to be ready *always* with answers for those who inquire of us concerning our faith. Most Christians have a great deal of study ahead of them before this verse will be a practical reality in their evangelistic efforts.

Another question that often comes up in a discussion about the merits and place of apologetics is, “What is the relationship of the mind to evangelism?” “Does the mind play any part in the process?” “What about the effects of the fall?” “Isn’t man dead in trespasses and sins?” “Doesn’t the Bible say we are to know nothing among men except Jesus Christ and Him crucified?” “Why do we have to get involved at all in apologetics if the Spirit is the One Who actually brings about the New Birth?”

I think you will agree that today there are many Christians

who are firmly convinced that answering the intellectual questions of unbelievers is an ineffectual waste of time. They feel that any involvement of the mind in the gospel interchange smacks too much of human effort and really just dilutes the Spirit's work.

But Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance. If a real Reformation is to accompany the revival for which many of us pray, it must be something of the mind as well as the heart. It was Jesus who said, "Come and see." He invites our scrutiny and investigation both before and after conversion.

We are to love God with the *mind* as well as the heart and the soul. In fact, the early church was powerful and successful because it out-thought and out-loved the ancient world. We are not doing either very well today.

Reasoning and Persuading

Most Christians today seem to prefer experiencing Christianity to thinking about or explaining it. But consider these verses:

Matthew 13:23: "But he who received the seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and *understands* it, who indeed bears fruit." They all heard it, but only the "good soil" *comprehended* it.

Acts 8:30: "When the Spirit prompted Philip to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch (who was reading Isaiah 53), he asked, `Do you *understand* what you are reading?' The eunuch replied, `How can I except some man should *guide* me?'"

Acts 18:4: Paul at Corinth was "reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath and trying to *persuade* the Jews and Greeks."

Acts 19:8: Paul at Ephesus "entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, *reasoning* and *persuading* them about the kingdom of God."

Romans 10:17: “So then faith comes by *hearing* and *hearing* by the word of God.” Again the emphasis is on hearing with perception.

2 Corinthians 5:11: “We *persuade* men,” says Paul. Vine’s *Expository Dictionary* describes this Greek word like this: “to apply persuasion, to prevail upon or win over, bringing about a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations.”

All of these words—persuasion, dialogue, discourse, dispute, argue, present evidence, reason with—are vehicles of communication and are at the heart of Paul’s classical evangelistic model. Can there be saving faith without understanding? Can there be understanding without reasoning? The Bible would appear to say no. Paul urges believers in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed.

J. Gresham Machen, a great Christian scholar, said the following words in 1912 to a group of young men at Princeton Seminary:

> It would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well-prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power in connection with certain prior conditions for the reception of the Gospel. . . . I do not mean that the removal of intellectual objections will make a man a Christian. No conversion was ever wrought by argument. A change of heart is also necessary . . . but because the intellectual labor is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes He does. But He does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connections with certain conditions of the human mind. Usually He does not bring into the kingdom, entirely without preparation, those whose mind and fancy are

> completely contaminated by ideas which make the acceptance of the Gospel logically impossible.

If these words were true in 1912, how much more are they needed today?

Individual Responses

People respond to the gospel for various reasons—some out of pain or a crisis, others out of some emotional need such as loneliness, guilt, insecurity, etc. Some do so out of a fear of divine judgment. And coming to know Christ brings a process of healing and hope to the human experience. To know Christ is to find comfort for pain, acceptance for insecurity and low self-esteem, forgiveness for sin and guilt.

And others seem to have *intellectual* questions which block their openness to accept the credibility of the Christian message. These finally find in Christ the answers to their intellectual doubts and questions.

Those today who are actively involved in evangelism readily recognize the need for this kind of information to witness to certain people, and there are many more doubters and skeptics out there today than there were even twenty years ago.

We can see more clearly where we are as a culture by taking a good look at Paul's world in the first century. Christianity's early beginnings flourished in a Graeco-Roman culture more X-rated and brutal than our own. And we find Paul *adapting* his approach from group to group.

For instance, he expected certain things to be in place when he approached the Jewish communities and synagogues from town to town. He knew he would find a group which already had certain beliefs which were not in contradiction to the gospel he preached. They were monotheists. They believed in one God. They also believed this God had spoken to them in their Scriptures and had given them absolute moral guidelines for

behavior (the Ten Commandments).

But when Paul went to the Gentile community, he had no such expectations. There he knew he would be faced with a culture that was polytheistic (many gods), biblically ignorant, and living all kinds of perverted, wicked lifestyles. And on Mars Hill in Athens when he preached the gospel, he did somewhat modify his approach.

He spoke of God more in terms of His presence and power, and he even quoted truth from a Greek poet in order to connect with these "pagans" and get his point across: "We are God's offspring" (Acts 17:28).

One hundred years ago, the vast majority of Americans pretty much reflected the Jewish mentality, believing in God, having a basic respect for the Bible, and strong convictions about what was right and what was wrong.

That kind of American can still be found today in the 90s, but George Gallup says they aren't having much of an impact on the pagan, or Gentile community, which today holds few beliefs compatible with historic Christianity.

To evangelize such people, we have our work cut out for us. And we will have to use both our minds and our hearts to "become all things to all men in order to save some."

A Variety of Approaches

As we're considering how we as Christians can have an impact on our increasingly fragmented society, we need to keep in mind that many do not share our Christian view of the world, and some are openly hostile to it.

In fact, a college professor recently commented that he felt the greatest impediment to social progress right now was what he called the bigoted, dogmatic Christian community. That's you and me, folks.

If we could just “loosen up a little,” and compromise on some issues, America would be a happier place. What is meant by this is not just a demand for tolerance . . . but wholesale acceptance of *any* person’s lifestyle and personal choices!

But the Bible calls us to be “salt and light” in our world. How can we be that effectively?I don’t have a total answer, but I’ll tell you after 30+ years of active ministry what isn’t working. And by my observation, far too many Christians are trying to address the horrendous issues of our day with one of three very ineffective approaches.

Defensive Approach – Many Christians out there are mainly asking the question, “How strong are our defenses?” “How high are our walls?” This barricade mentality has produced much of the Christian subculture. We have our own language, literature, heroes, music, customs, and educational systems. Of course, we need places of support and fellowship. But when Paul describes spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10, he actually *reverses* the picture. It is the *enemy* who is behind walls, inside strongholds of error and evil. And Paul depicts the Christians as those who should be mounting offensives at these walls to tear down the high things which have exalted themselves above the knowledge of God. We are to be *taking* ground, not just holding it.

Defeatist Approach – Other Christians have already given up. Things are so bad, they say, that my puny efforts won’t change anything. “After all, we are living in the last days, and Jesus said that things would just get worse and worse.” This may be true, but it may not be. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour of His coming. Martin Luther had the right idea when he said, “If Jesus were to come tomorrow, I’d plant a tree today and pay my debts.” The Lord may well be near, He could also tarry awhile. Since we don’t know for sure, we should be seeking to prepare ourselves and our children to live for Him in the microchip world of the 21st century.

Devotional Approach – Other Christians are trying to say something about their faith, but sadly, they can only share their personal religious experience. It is true that Paul speaks of us as "epistles known and read" by all men. Our life/experience with Christ *is* a valid witness. But there are others out there in the culture with "changed" lives . . . and Jesus didn't do the changing! Evangelism today must be something more than "swapping" experiences. We must learn how to ground our faith in the facts of history and the claims of Christ. We must have others grapple with Jesus Christ, nor just our experience.

Apologetics and Evangelism

I want to conclude this essay with some very important principles to keep in mind if we want to be effective in seeing others come to know Christ through our individual witness.

1. Go to people. The heart of evangelism is Christians taking the initiative to actually go out and "fish for men." Acts 17:17 describes for us how Paul was effective in his day and time: "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."

2. Communicate with people. Engage them. Sharing the Gospel involves communication. People must be focused upon and then understand the Gospel to respond to it. It is our responsibility as Christians to make it as clear as possible for all who will listen. "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11).

3. Relate to people. Effective witness involves not only the transmission of biblical information; it also includes establishing a relationship with the other person. Hearts, as well as heads, must meet. "So, affectionately longing for you," said Paul to the Thessalonians, "we were well pleased to

import to you not only the good news of God, but also our own lives, because you have become dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

4. Remove barriers. Part of our responsibility involves having the skills to eliminate obstacles, real or imagined, which keep an individual from taking the Christian message seriously. When God sent the prophet Jeremiah forth, He said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth . . . and I have ordained you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Sometimes our task as well is one of "spiritual demolition," of removing the false so the seeds of truth can take root. Apologetics sometimes serves in that capacity, of preparing a highway for God in someone's life.

5. Explain the gospel to others. We need an *army* of Christians today who can consistently and clearly present the message to as many people as possible. Luke says of Lydia, "The Lord opened her heart so that she heeded the things which were spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Four essential elements in sharing the gospel:

- someone talking (Paul)
- things spoken (gospel)
- someone listening (Lydia)
- the Lord opening the heart.

6. Invite others to receive Christ. We can be clear of presentation, but ineffective because we fail to give someone the opportunity and encouragement to take that first major step of faith. "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we beg you in Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

7. Make every effort by every means to establish them in the faith. Stay with them, ground them in the Scripture, help them gain assurance of their salvation, and get them active in a vital fellowship/church.

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