

# The Social and Historical Impact of Christianity

*Probe founder Jimmy Williams examines the charge that Christianity has been detrimental to society, providing evidence for the contrary—that it has been a force for good.*

## Introduction

W.E.H. Lecky has commented on the Enlightenment that “The greatest religious change in the history of mankind” took place “under the eyes of a brilliant galaxy of philosophers and historians who disregarded as contemptible an Agency (*Christianity*) which all men must now admit to have been . . . the most powerful moral lever that has ever been applied to the affairs of men.”[\[1\]](#)

And yet, the West is in the process of abandoning its Judeo-Christian base which was the very source of this social development (Is this good or bad? Can we even ask such questions of history?).

## The Negative Charge: Christianity has been a repressive force against the advancement of civilization.

A. Karl Marx termed Christianity an opiate of the masses, a tool of exploitation.

B. Sigmund Freud called Christianity an illusion, a crutch, a source of guilt and pathologies.

C. Bertrand Russell: “I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of the moral progress in the world.”[\[2\]](#)

D. Arnold Toynbee: "When the Greco-Roman world was converted to Christianity, the divinity was drained out of nature and concentrated in a single, transcendent God. Man's greedy impulse to exploit nature used to be held in check by his awe, his pious worship of nature. Now monotheism, as enunciated in Genesis, has removed the age-old restraint."[\[3\]](#)

E. Gloria Steinem observed that human potential must replace God by the year 2000.

F. Lyn White: "Christians, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[\[4\]](#) "The crisis will not abate until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[\[5\]](#)

Summary: Christianity. . .

1. Is a crutch
2. Impedes science
3. Is a source of bigotry
4. Causes wars
5. Causes pollution and animal extinction
6. Contributes to the population explosion
7. Causes inflation.

## Analysis of the Charges

(Unfortunately, *some* of the charges are true.)

A. The church, as an institution, has not always been a positive influence for social change.

1. Two major errors:

**Platonism** – The spiritual sphere is the real world. Matter is evil. Thus, the body is the prison of the soul. This sacred/secular distinction has resulted in the "pie in the sky" religion which has at times not been concerned about

social reform.

**Humanism** – Views the physical and social needs of man as the only importance. The institutional church has, at times, failed at preaching regeneration.[\[6\]](#)

2. Jesus was concerned for the *total* man. Should we put a “new suit” on the man, or a “new man” in a suit? Jesus would have done both—put a new suit on a new man! (See the Gospels).

B. When the church is assimilated by the culture in which it finds itself, it loses its cutting edge. Example: Under Constantine in the 4th century, “The church became a little worldly and the world became a little churchy.”

C. The institutional church and true Christianity are not always synonymous. Professing Christians many not live up to the ideals and practices of its Founder (“Faith without works is dead,” James 2:26).

1. Renaissance popes are *not* Christianity; St. Francis of Assisi *is*.

2. Pizarro and Cortez are *not* Christianity, Bartolome de Las Casas *is*.

3. Captain Ball, a Yankee slave captain, is *not* Christianity, Wilburforce *is*.

D. Jesus Himself foretold that “tares” would be won among the “wheat.” (Matt. 13:25-39 ff).

## **Christianity's Positive Impact**

A. The Rise of Modern Science

1. Science rose in the West, not in the East. Why?

2. Whitehead and Oppenheimer insisted that modern science

could not have been born except in a Christian milieu.

3. Many pioneering scientists were not only theists, but Christians: Newton, Pasteur, Kepler, Pascal, Fleming, Edwards.

4. Concepts conducive to scientific inquiry were expressly Christian:

- a. Positive attitude toward the world.

- b. Awareness of order (i.e. cause/effect, cf. Rom. 1:20).

- c. Views of man as a superintendent of nature.

- d. Positive attitude toward progress ("Have dominion . . . ." [Gen. 1:28ff])

## B. The Development of Higher Education

1. The Puritans were 95 per cent literate.

2. The University movement and the quest for knowledge (Berkeley, Descartes, the British Empiricists, Locke & Reid).

3. 100 of the first 110 universities in America were founded for the express purpose of propagating the Christian religion.

4. The American university emerged from American Seminaries (Witherspoon, Princeton; Timothy Dwight, Yale).

C. Christianity and the Arts: the influence has been so broad as to be inestimable.

## D. Social Change

### 1. Means of Social Change

- a. Reform—moderately effective, but slow. Not always good.

b. Revolution—more rapid, but usually bloody.

c. Regeneration—Changing persons changes society. Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . That which is born of flesh is flesh: that which is born of spirit is spirit” (John 3:3,6). Paul spoke of the Christian rebirth in this way, “Do not be conformed to this world-system, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .” (Romans 12:2).

d. There is a difference between *professing* Christianity and *possessing* a personal relationship with Christ.

## 2. Examples in the Early Church

a. In 252 A.D., the Christians of Corinth saved the city from the plague by responding to the needs of those who were simply dragged into the street.

b. In 312 A.D., half of the Roman Empire came under the political and social influence of Christianity under the rule of Constantine.

c. Early Christians stood in opposition to infanticide, degradation of women, gladiatorial combats, slavery, etc.

## 3. Examples in the Middle Ages (Consider the Monks, not the knights.)

a. Monasteries served as hospitals, places of refuge.

b. Monastic schools trained scribes to preserve manuscripts.

c. Monasteries also developed agricultural skills and knowledge.

d. The Scholastics remain a pivotal period of intellectual growth.

e. A time of major artistic development: architecture, music, literature.

#### 4. Examples during the Reformation

a. A myriad of forces were at work in the vast social and religious shift known as the Reformation (i.e. Luther, printing, Gutenberg Bible).

b. Calvin and the other reformers must not be ignored. Says Fred Graham in *The Constructive Revolutionary*, "Economic, scientific, and political historians . . . generally know little about Calvin's own secular ideas. They assume that it was simply the rupture with tradition made by Calvinists which produced certain changes of life-styles which, in turn, affected society in Protestant countries in later centuries. But the heart of this study shows clearly that Calvin himself was aware of the epochal character of his own (social and economic) teaching and of the transforming implications of the Genevan pattern which he had a hand in forming" (11).

#### 5. Examples in Colonial America.

a. The First Great Awakening (1725-75) raised up many American universities. 100 of the first 110 American universities were founded expressly founded for the purpose of training men to propagate the Christian faith.

b. American educational and political systems, Christian influences.

1) Colonial education was classical and Christian, with the Bible and its principles primary to all learning. The New England Primer appeared about 1690 and was almost universally adopted. It was the chief beginning reading book for American schools for over 100 years. The contents clearly show its religious character and purpose which included forty pages containing the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

2) Framers of the Constitution and Declaration of

Independence. The vast majority at the Constitutional Convention (55 delegates) were members of Protestant churches: 28 Episcopalians, eight Presbyterians, seven Congregationalists, two Lutherans, two Dutch Reformed, two Methodists, two Roman Catholics, three Deists, one unknown.

c. The Wesley-Whitefield revivals resulted in millions of Christian conversions. Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was converted after hearing the preface of Luther's commentary on Romans read at Aldersgate: "About a quarter before nine, which they were describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, and Christ alone, for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

d. Wesley preached the social responsibilities of Christian piety:

1772 – Slavery was judicially excluded from England, 14,000 freed

1792 – Conditions aboard slave ships were regulated by law

1808 – The English slave trade was abolished.

1831 – All European slave trade abolished. England spent 15 million pounds for enforcement, even making payments to Spain and Portugal to stop the trade.

1833 – Slavery abolished in British Empire: 45 million pounds paid in compensation to free 780,933 slaves. Wilberforce, along with Buxton, Macaulay, and Clark . . . all evangelicals who were converted under Wesley's ministry, were the top leaders in ending slavery (This British action in the 1830's profoundly affected American

attitudes which resulted in the Civil War).

e. Prison reform: John Howard, Elizabeth Fry (England); Fliedner (Germany). Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, was trained in one of Fliedner's schools in Kaiserswerth.

f. Labor reform: Anthony Ashley Cooper (Earl of Shaftesbury, self-described "Evangelical of the Evangelicals" pioneered child-labor laws, prohibited women working in the mines, established mental health sanitarium, built parts and libraries).

g. Harriett Beecher Stowe. Daughter of a preacher, married to a preacher; all her brothers were preachers. Her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ignited the minds and imaginations of people in both North and South. "So this is the little lady who made this big war," said Abraham Lincoln upon meeting her for the first time. Her book was the first great American bestseller. (Initial print run was 300,000 copies. Sold three million copies in America, then 40 million worldwide in 40 languages).

h. The Third Great Awakening (1858-59) produced a rash of missionary and philanthropic organizations in the U. S. and England:

- Barnardo's Homes (world's largest orphanage system)
- William Booth's Salvation Army
- Henri Dunant, a student evangelist in Geneva, founded the Red Cross in 1865
- YMCA was founded in 1844 and grew greatly
- The missionaries from William Carey on:

–CMS (Christian Missionary Society) taught 200,000 to read in East Africa in one generation

–Secured the abolition of widow-burning and child sacrifice

–Brought medicine to the world



–Actually founded the educational systems in China, Japan, and Korea.

i. Today: World Vision, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Mission agencies, Parachurch groups, Denominational missionaries, medical personnel, teachers, and volunteers.

## Conclusion

“It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the coming of Christianity. It brought with it, for one thing, an altogether new sense of human life. For the Greeks had shown man his mind; but the Christians showed him his soul. They taught that in the sight of God, all souls were equal, that every human life was sacrosanct and inviolate. Where the Greeks had identified the beautiful and the good, had thought ugliness to be bad, had shrunk from disease and imperfection and from everything misshapen, horrible, and repulsive, the Christian sought out the diseased, the crippled, the mutilated, to give them help. Love, for the ancient Greek, was never quite distinguished from Venus. For the Christians held that God was love, it took on deep overtones of sacrifice and compassion.” – R. R. Palmer (standard college history text)

“The history of Christianity is inseparable from the history of Western culture and of Western society. For almost a score of centuries Christian beliefs, principles, and ideals have colored the thoughts and feelings of Western man. The traditions and practices have left an indelible impress not only on developments of purely religious interest, but on virtually the total endeavor of man. This has been manifest in art and literature, science and law, politics and economics, and, as well, in love and war. Indeed, the indirect and unconscious influence Christianity has often exercised in avowedly secular matters—social, intellectual, and institutional—affords striking proof of the dynamic forces that have been generated by the faith over the millennia. Even those who have contested its claims and rejected its

tenets have been affected by what they opposed. Whatever our beliefs, all of us today are inevitable heirs to this abundant legacy; and it is impossible to understand the cultural heritage that sustains and conditions our lives without considering the contributions of Christianity.”

“Since the death of Christ, his followers have known vicissitudes as well as glory and authority. The Christian religion has suffered periods of persecution and critical divisions within its own ranks. It has been the cause and the victim of war and strife. It has assumed forms of astonishing variety. It has been confronted by revolutionary changes in human and social outlooks and subjected to searching criticism. The culture of our own time, indeed, has been termed the most completely secularized form of culture the world has ever known. We live in what some have called the post-Christian age. Yet wherever we turn to enrich our lives, we continue to encounter the lasting historical realities of Christian experience and tradition.”[\[7\]](#)

In contrast to the Christian system, modern materialistic philosophies do not provide a strong basis for reform. Humanism is, in effect, a philosophic smuggler; it has borrowed the “dignity of man” from Christian precepts and has not bothered to say, “Thank you.”

## Notes

1. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, NY: Appleton, 1905, Vol. I, 28-29) (explanatory insert mine).
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 21.
3. Arnold Toynbee, *Horizon* magazine, 1973).
4. Lyn White, *Science Magazine*, 1967.
5. *The Environmental Handbook*, p. 25.
6. Alan Menninger: *Whatever Became of Sin?*
7. Roland H. Bainton, Professor Emeritus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Yale University. *Horizon Magazine*, Marshall B. Davidson, et. al., American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc.: New

York. Distributed by Harper and Row, 1964.

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# A Famous Revolutionary's Surprising Past

Written by Rusty Wright

Quiz: What famous revolutionary, born in May, wrote the following words? (The answer may surprise you.)

"Says Christ... 'I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing...' Our heart, our reason, history itself, and the word of Christ, all call to us loudly and decisively that a union with Him is an absolute necessity, that... only He can save us."

Was it Pope John Paul II? Martin Luther? Billy Graham? Mother Teresa?

A seventeen-year-old German student wrote this as part of a school essay. Descended from a long line of rabbis, his father had become a nominal Christian for social and economic reasons. The lad went off to study at the University of Berlin where he became enamored of the writings of the recently deceased dialectical philosopher Hegel as well as of other law and philosophy professors.

Soon he became disenchanted with Christianity, viewing it as a means of oppression and social control. His doctoral dissertation expressed his disdain with religion. A few years later he affirmed that "man makes religion, religion does not make man" and saw religion as "the opium of the people." He felt "the social principles of Christianity are hypocritical."

Thirteen years after his touching essay on union with Christ, Karl Marx wrote (with Frederick Engels), "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism. . . . The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have

a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!"

Now, over 150 years after The Communist Manifesto was first published, we might say, "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of democracy" (albeit with a few bumps). During the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow demonstrators held up a banner reading "Workers of the World, We Apologize."

Ironically, much of the democratic fervor that swept former Communist states during the last decade was fueled by religious commitment. Influence by the Catholic Church in Poland and the Protestant church in East Germany and Romania were but a few examples. Prayer meetings led to demonstrations that eventually brought down despots. A "revolution by candlelight", some have called it.

The hunger for spiritual fulfillment is a deep human longing. The dedication that filling a spiritual void can bring has sparked social reforms too numerous to detail. Eighteenth century British parliamentarian William Wilberforce spent decades opposing the slave trade. He endured ridicule and ill health as he took on the moneyed establishment on an issue that affected their pocketbook but apparently not their conscience. Wilberforce's Christian conviction drove and sustained him to a successful end.

One of Wilberforce's chief encouragers was John Newton, a pastor and former slave trader who found faith during a storm at sea. He is perhaps best known for writing the ever-popular song, "Amazing Grace."

Another supporter was John Wesley, founder of Methodism. The last letter Wesley ever wrote was to Wilberforce encouraging him to continue his uphill fight: "O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it."

Karl Marx learned to hate Christianity. How might history have

differed had the young Marx met intelligent but sensitive believers who could have explained the faith's intellectual roots while demonstrating Jesus' concern for the poor and suffering? Could knowing Wilberforce or Newton or Wesley have made a difference?

What about today's socially concerned? As they watch spiritual leaders, will they see the compassion and passionate dedication to justice and truth that past heroes of the faith displayed? Or will they see moral compromise and indifference? Might a future Karl Marx be watching?

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## Christmas Film Favorites

*Todd Kappelman highlights some favorite films of the Christmas season, encouraging Christians to enjoy the films while separating the sacred from the secular.*

### ***A Christmas Carol***

In this article we will examine several classics of film and television that have become perennial favorites during the Christmas season. We'll start with a review of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The 1938 Metro Goldwin Mayer version is our primary reference, although there are several remakes and versions that would be worthy of our attention. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* remains one of the all-time favorite seasonal films and is worthy of an annual viewing for a number of reasons.



The primary reason that the *Carol* is still important is that Christmas has become a commercial disaster that tends to focus our attention on the material aspects of the season and neglect the spiritual and humanitarian dimensions. A *Christmas Carol* must be understood as the loud cry of a Victorian prophet sounding the warning of the evils of poverty. The settings in Dickens' stories, illustrating the abysmal conditions in nineteenth century England, have long been understood to be a valuable reminder of the social inequities during the industrial revolution. This is the background of the famous Christmas tale.

The film opens with Ebenezer Scrooge's nephew Fred playing in the snow with several young boys. One of the boys is Tiny Tim, the handicapped son of one of Scrooge's employees, Bob Cratchet. The story develops quickly as the merry and cheerful lives of every man, woman, and child in England are contrasted with the disgruntled and miserable life of Scrooge (Reginald Owen). Scrooge is a rich business man with want of nothing, and yet he cannot, or will not, find it in his heart to enter into the spirit of the season. At midnight on Christmas Eve all of this will change as he is visited by the three ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

The ghost of Christmas past shows Scrooge his childhood school and friends. He remembers the time as mixed with joy and confusion. Joy because of his friends, and confusion because his father does not participate in the season in the same manner as other families. It is at this point that he becomes hardened as a young man and turns to a life of greed.

When the ghost of Christmas present comes, Scrooge is shown how other people are spending the evening. This is where he learns that Christmas may be enjoyed in spite of being poor and that it is a time of opportunity for those who have material blessings to share with those who do not.

Finally, when the ghost of Christmas future comes, Scrooge is shown the grave that awaits him. He inquires whether one may not change his ways and thus alter his destiny. Although the ghost, who is actually the Grim Reaper, does not respond Scrooge surmises that this must be possible or the ghosts would not be visiting him in the first place. Scrooge learns his lesson in the end and has what amounts to a “conversion” for Dickens. The film and story conversion amount to a humanitarian change of heart and are thin on the Christian emphasis in spite of the presence of worship services and praying families. What we should take with us from the film is the fact that we can learn from the past and appropriate it in the present for a better future. Likewise we can use the Christmas season as an opportunity to focus on that which really matters, which for Christians is the birth Jesus Christ.

## **Miracle on 34th Street**

*Miracle on 34th Street*, much like *A Christmas Carol*, is an example of the humanitarian variety of Christmas films.

*Miracle on 34th Street* opens during the Macy’s Annual Thanksgiving Day Parade. The man who has been hired to play Santa is drunk, and the organizer, a Mrs. Doris Walker (Maureen O’Hara), is desperate to find a suitable stand-in. Fortunately the real Santa, a.k.a. Kriss Kringle (Edmund Gwenn), has been wandering the streets of New York and reluctantly agrees to help out. After the parade is over he begins to work at Macy’s as the store’s Santa Claus and causes quite a commotion.

Being the real Santa Claus, Kringle puts the children first and the commercialism last among his job concerns. He has been instructed by the store manager to influence the children to ask their parents for toys that are in abundant supply and



thus help to sell the store's surplus merchandise. Kringle laments the request and will have nothing to do with further commercializing the season.

Kringle elects instead to listen seriously to the children's requests and send their parents to rival department stores if necessary to secure the desired presents. This causes the store's manager and Mrs. Walker great concern about what Mr. Macy, the owner, will do when he finds out. The customers could not be happier with the store and it is considered a great humanitarian gesture on the part of Macy to put the children ahead of the profits. Other stores follow suit, and there is a citywide, then nationwide, movement to assist customers and children ahead of the store's interests.

There is a major plot twist when Santa is brought to a competency hearing in the New York County Court because he claims to be Santa Claus. His trial is front-page news, and everyone anxiously follows the story to see if the court will find in favor of the existence of Santa Claus or rule that it has all been a commercial hoax of the tallest order.

Mrs. Walker's daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood), has been watching the story unfold and serves as a prop for those who posture themselves more realistically to the Christmas myth of Santa Claus and reindeer. The little girl has been raised by her divorced mother to accept nothing but the sober truth about life; there are no fairy tales, myths, or Santa for this young girl.

However, when Santa is found to exist in actuality by the court there is a new opportunity for both the girl and her mother to reconsider their skepticism. The mother willingly concedes the existence of Santa Claus, but the daughter is much more demanding concerning what is necessary for her to believe. The emphasis of the story is not Christian specifically, but rather humanitarian. The lesson is that if one will turn from one's crass commercialism and embrace one's

fellow man the true spirit of the season can be enjoyed. As Christians we should be happy that a classic such as this warns us against the pitfalls of materialism, yet cautious about adding too much by way of Christianizing the story.

## ***How the Grinch Stole Christmas***

As we continue in our survey of Christmas films you will notice the difference between films such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which have a more humanitarian emphasis, and films like *It's A Wonderful Life*, with a stronger Christian emphasis. The film we now turn to consider, Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, conveys more of the humanitarian message. This is the first of two animated classics to be reviewed.

The tale is set in Whoville where the inhabitants are preparing for their Yuletide celebration. The Whovillians enjoy a classic Christmas similar to that of most middle-class suburbanites. There are plenty of presents for the children, snacks and food of every conceivable kind, trees, fireplaces and even "roast beast."

The Grinch (Boris Karloff, voice), a villainous creature with a twisted and defective spirit due to his tiny heart, lives in the mountains of Whoville. He is devising a scheme to steal Christmas from the townspeople below by taking the trees and gifts and food. The Grinch's rationale is that Christmas is somehow dependent on these things. If he steals them it will cause the Whos to wake up on Christmas morning and "find out that there is no Christmas."

The Grinch pulls off the heist and returns to his mountain hideout with every tree, gift, and crumb of food from all the Who houses only to discover a most startling surprise on Christmas morning. The Whos in Whoville awaken and begin to sing songs in spite of having no presents or food. The Grinch cannot understand how Christmas can come "without ribbons and

packages, boxes and bows.” He had expected the Whos to “all cry boo-hoo.” Instead, he finds that Christmas does not come from a store. At this discovery the Grinch’s heart grows three sizes. He has seen the true meaning of Christmas.

There is an extremely important message in Dr. Seuss’ cartoon classic. Christmas does not come from a store and we should not participate in the commercial trappings of the season to the detriment of the real reason we have cause to celebrate. The season is about Christ, the Savior of the world, and it should be used as an occasion to celebrate this fact with fellow Christians and witness to those who are lost. We can learn from the Whovillians that Christmas can come without all of the whistles and bells that have become so much of the emphasis in our contemporary celebrations.

The message that we should be careful of is the simple humanitarian turn that is so frequently substituted for the real message. The Grinch has a change of heart, much like the change of heart experienced by Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and Mrs. Walker in *Miracle on 34th Street*. It should not be inferred that this is a complaint against Dr. Seuss for not rendering a Christian message; that was certainly not his intent. It is, however, a reminder that the Christmas season is not a success just because we use it as an occasion for good will to our fellow men. It is true that the world needs more good will between men, from the nuclear family to international affairs. But Christ said that “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” True abundant life and good will which will last for eternity are found in a personal relationship with Christ. Keep this in mind and have a truly merry Christmas.

## ***It’s A Wonderful Life***

We are offering a list of suggestions for films which may be enjoyed by the whole family as both a point of fellowship and an opportunity for reflection during the Christmas season. The

film we'll now consider is Frank Capra's 1946 classic *It's A Wonderful Life*. This film has achieved a cult status as the embodiment of why we should be thankful as well as a reflection on the dignity and value of every individual regardless of one's perceived worth.

The film is the story about a young man named George Bailey (James Stewart) who is saved from suicide by a guardian angel named Clarence (Henry Travers). In the opening sequence the people in Bedford Falls are giving thanks to God for what George has meant to them. The scene of the action then changes to the celestial heavens where Joseph, Clarence, and God are discussing the need to intervene in George's life.

George's father, the owner and executive officer of Bailey Building and Loan, suffers a stroke at the beginning of the film and George, the eldest of two children, must assume his father's position. George foregoes his desires to travel and go to college. Instead he remains in Bedford Falls and marries a childhood acquaintance named Mary Hatch (Donna Reed). He and Mary are poor but extremely happy during the early years of their marriage. The events in George's life will become unbearable when the Building and Loan is in danger of a scandal and foreclosure through no fault on his part. Considering his life insurance policy, he concludes that he would be better off dead than alive.

The dramatic action of the film shifts when Clarence, George's guardian angel, rescues him from his suicide attempt. In response to George's statement that everyone would be better off if he were dead, Clarence offers George a guided tour of what Bedford Falls would be like if he had never been born. One of the first and most startling discoveries George makes concerns Mr. Gower, a druggist whom he worked for when he was a young boy. George had prevented Gower from making a deadly mistake in filling a prescription that would have killed a patient. However, on this occasion George was not there to prevent the accident. Without George Bailey, Gower spent

twenty years in prison and became an alcoholic.

The events continue to unfold as George learns that the men saved by his brother Harry in World War II were killed because George had not saved his brother from drowning when they were young. George's wife, Mary, has become an old maid and his children Zu Zu, Tommy, and Janie were never born. The town is no longer called Bedford Falls, but Pottersville, after George's arch rival and evil banker Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore). The entire town—from the druggist, to the girl next door, from the saloon owners to the librarian —is different as a result of George's having never been born. There is an oppressive cloud over the town as it mourns the loss of a citizen it never knew.

The idea that all men have a purpose can only be understood in light of a world created by a God who designed that purpose and gives all men a chance to fulfill their end. Frank Capra's classic *It's A Wonderful Life* can serve as a reminder to all this Christmas season that God puts each and every individual here for a specific purpose. It truly is a wonderful life!

## ***A Charlie Brown Christmas***

We conclude our series on films and television specials of the Christmas season with what many believe to be one of the most overtly Christian programs in the genre, Charles Schultz's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Thus far we have looked at *A Christmas Carol*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*. The major division between these films and specials is that some have a merely humanitarian theme, and others have a more or less classic Christian interpretation of Christmas. We have mentioned that there is nothing wrong with the humanitarian emphasis as far as it goes, but Christians should understand the finer distinctions between the two renderings of the meaning of Christmas.

*A Charlie Brown Christmas* opens with Charlie Brown in his usual state of mild depression, searching for the meaning of something. This time it is the true meaning of Christmas. He proclaims to Lucy that it just does not feel like Christmas and that his problem is that he just doesn't understand it. Lucy charges Charlie Brown five cents and tells him nothing of any value; her solution is a naturalistic approach with a focus on monetary gain.

Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, is a prototypical adolescent. She proclaims that all she wants for Christmas is everything that is coming to her; she wants her fair share. She represents the voice of all who equate Christmas primarily with a time of getting presents. It is sad when a child believes this about Christmas; it is tragic when an adult holds the same view. Lucy interrupts the exchange between Charlie Brown and his sister Sally to announce that we all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. The truth here is that we all know that Christmas has become a big commercial racket; the tragedy is that we do so little about it.

The scene changes again when Charlie Brown is put in charge of the Christmas play and must find an appropriate Christmas tree. In true Charlie Brown fashion he selects a pitiful specimen that is losing all of its nettles and cannot support itself. The tree becomes a symbol for Charlie Brown and the limp and pathetic status of our contemporary celebration of Christmas; something has gone terribly wrong. Lucy's jaded expectations and Sally's crass materialism have only led Charlie Brown to a deeper state of depression. The answers have failed to comfort him, thus the season looks bleak and hopeless. This leads to his final cry for someone who knows the true meaning of Christmas to come forward.

Linus, the blanket introvert virtuoso, enters and assumes center stage. As the existential hero of the story, the true meaning of Christmas has not eluded him. He tells Charlie Brown that he will now give an account of what Christmas

means. In a direct quotation from Luke 2:10-11, Linus tells them of the annunciation by the angel concerning the birth of the baby Jesus.

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. (KJV)*

In this, the most overtly Christian of the Christmas specials we have discussed, there is a clear and unmistakable account of the true meaning of the Christmas season. Have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

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## Why Care About History?

*Jerry Solomon discusses the importance of history to the Christian worldview, encouraging believers to enjoy the blessings of God's work in space and time.*

### Why Care About History? Because History Defines Us

Let's listen to a typical conversation between two people who are meeting each other at a convention.

*Carl:* Hello! My name is Carl Simpson.

*James:* Hello! My name is James Cameron.

*Carl:* Where are you from, James?

*James:* Well, I grew up in the Miami area, but I've lived in

Dallas for the past twenty years.

*Carl:* Really? I grew up in the Miami area.

*James:* Oh yeah, where?

*Carl:* Near Little Havana.

*James:* That's interesting. I grew up in Coral Gables.

*Carl:* Did you attend Coral Gables High School?

*James:* Yes, I did.

*Carl:* Did you play football?

*James:* As a matter of fact, yes. I was the starting fullback in 1963, my senior year.

*Carl:* You're kidding! I was the starting middle linebacker that year and the next. We must have "buted heads" a few times.

*James:* Actually, now that I think about it, I can remember running over you a few times during the '63 game. You do recall that we won and went on to win the state championship, don't you?

*Carl:* Well, I certainly don't remember you running over me. But yes, I do remember your success that year. Of course you remember you won our game because of that ridiculous pass interference call on me in the end zone with 30 seconds left, don't you?

*James:* That was you, wasn't it? Well, looking back I have to admit it was a pretty lousy call.

*Carl:* I'm amazed that we've met like this after all these years. What's your occupation?

*James:* I work for a computer consulting firm in Dallas. That's



why I'm at this convention.

*Carl:* That's remarkable! I work for the same type of company in Miami.

*James:* Well, it looks as if there is a lot we can talk about. What are you doing for dinner tonight?

*Carl:* I don't have any plans at the moment.

*James:* Great! Why don't we meet in the lobby at 6:30 and go to dinner?

*Carl:* Wonderful! I'll see you then!

This fictional encounter is not so farfetched that we can't identify with it. Even though we may not have been football players, all of us can share stories of how we have met people. Usually we enter such encounters by sharing our past—our history. And we listen as the person we are meeting does the same. Our history defines us. Before we share who we are in present time, we usually share our past. In this way, and many other ways, we demonstrate the importance of history in our personal lives.

In much the same way, we tend to think of historical markers that provide us with a collective sense of cohesiveness. For example, some vividly remember the day President Roosevelt declared war on Japan. That day is indelibly written on their minds. They probably have many stories to tell about where they were and who was with them when they heard the declaration. They can share their feelings about how that day changed their lives. The same can be said of those who first heard of the assassination of President Kennedy. Or many can relate the experience of watching television as the first man walked on the moon. Events such as these will be passed from generation to generation as personal and collective markers.

What are the historical markers in your life and the lives of

those you love? Do such markers make a difference in your lives? Surely the answer is a resounding “Yes”!

## **Why Care About History? Because the Bible Contains History**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). This most famous of biblical verses has been referenced for a variety of reasons. Let's give thought to it in light of its historical implications.

Consider the opening phrase: In the beginning. The Hebrew word for beginning means “the first—in place, time, order or rank.” Thus the verse asserts that God was making history. He was doing something for the first time. He was creating the universe. An event was taking place. The Bible is clear about the fact that this was the first historical event. The universe was created, thus it is not eternal.

This amazing starting point provides a harbinger of what is to come in the biblical record. It is as if this initial declaration is intended to alert us to a critical element of the Bible: it is a historical record. It contains a record of God's actions within His creation, especially His interaction with man. “The Bible clearly delineates the decisive issues in the human struggle as a course of events in which God is everywhere active either in mercy or in judgment.”{1} Thus a student of the biblical chronicle is challenged to take history seriously. This has been true from the time of the early Hebrews. “In a world where others interpreted all that happens as cyclical process, the Hebrews with their awareness of God's active revelation in external human affairs instituted the very idea of history.”{2}

In our time it is critical that Christians continue in the line of the ancient Hebrews. History is under attack from many quarters for many reasons. “Some . . . consider the past without value because they assume either that anything

historical is insignificant or that anything temporal is relative, or that the present has evolutionary superiority, or that only the supertemporal and eternal has divine import or, more radically, that no God whatever exists to reveal himself in history.”{3} A Christian worldview, based on Scripture, cannot subscribe to such perspectives. If such views were given credence, Christianity would no longer depend on the events on which it is based. Instead, it would be viewed as the product of the mythology that some claim for it. The record of God’s work among us would be reduced to nothing more than the result of someone’s vivid imagination.

Of course a Christian who is mentally and spiritually vigorous will continue to affirm the authenticity of the history contained in the Bible. Consider the way in which the text propels us forward toward a grand consummation. One is hard pressed to mangle the Bible in order to assert anything other than the hand of divine providence. To put it in contemporary terms, biblical history is going somewhere. This perspective is in contrast to those who see all history as chaotic, circular, or meaningless. The linear nature of the Bible teaches us that what has happened is important, because it touches what is happening and what will happen. “From its inception, Christianity has been a religion with a past. Without that past, Christians could have no grounded hope for the future.”{4} Genesis speaks of the beginning, Revelation speaks of the end. In between, the Bible gives coherence to the beginning and the end, because the God of both is Alpha and Omega.

## **Why Care About History? Because Jesus Took History Seriously**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1). This startling introduction to John’s gospel gives us a wealth of insight about Jesus Christ, the Word. Among those insights is that Jesus is introduced in

both eternal and historic terms. As the first chapter continues, we note that the Word has entered time and space, as Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying. Consider some of the phrases:

There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man [v. 9].

He was in the world . . . [v. 10].

He came to His own . . . [v. 11].

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory . . . [v. 14].

. . . grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ [v. 17].

Note the verb forms in these phrases: coming, was, came, became, were realized. All of them are indicators of the fact that Jesus, the Word, entered history. The importance of such observations cannot be exaggerated. Jesus entered history and made history. In fact, He is the Lord of history. Let's consider how this Lord affirmed history after such an auspicious beginning.

Early in His ministry Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth, entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and began to read from the scroll of Isaiah. In particular, He read from what we now know as chapter 61, which contains a strong prophecy concerning His ministry. After reading the text, He sat down and boldly proclaimed, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). He followed this amazing statement with a brief exposition of events surrounding the prophets Elijah and Elisha. His audience reacted by driving Him out of the city and trying to kill Him.

As always, much could be written about this incident, but let's simply reflect on what Jesus implied about history.

First, Jesus took Isaiah's prophecy seriously as history. In other words, what Isaiah wrote is to be seen as something written in past time in reference to an actual future event. Second, Jesus claimed to be the one about whom Isaiah prophesied, a claim guaranteed to get the attention of His Jewish audience. Third, by referring to Elijah and Elisha, Jesus proceeded to give assent to biblical history.

One of the most profound ways in which our Lord emphasized the importance of history is found in the event of the Last Supper. "And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me'" (Luke 22:19). The last phrase, "do this in remembrance of Me," indicates how His disciples are to focus on this singular event. It is a historical marker we are not to forget.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul affirms the historicity of the Lord's Supper by quoting Jesus' statement. Paul then interprets the supper by teaching about the result of our obedience. He writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Thus, when we partake of the Lord's Supper we are proclaiming the awesome nature of Christ's crucifixion within the unfolding historical drama of God's work of redemption.

## **Why Care About History? Because Christian Beliefs are Based on History**

If you call yourself a Christian, how would you explain what that means to others? Would you include historical emphases? Would you base your statements on events that took place in the past? Or would you only share what is happening in your life now? What is happening now certainly is very important, but present experiences are valid because of what happened in the past. For example, to say something about "the Christ" in

your life can be meaningless historically. But the person who turns to Scripture when referring to Christ must endorse a real person acting in real history.

One of the most significant ways to establish the importance of history for Christian beliefs is to focus on two biblical turning points, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. "Christianity is . . . a historical religion in the sense that the actual occurrence of certain events like the crucifixion and the resurrection is a necessary condition for its truth." {5} This necessity distinguishes Christianity from the world religions. In contrast to the Buddha, for example, the weight of the claims of Christ rests on what He did in space and time, not just what He taught.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul expounds on this.

[v. 3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

[v. 4] and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, v. 5 and that He appeared. . . .

Let's note several things about these verses. First, Paul uses the phrase of first importance to alert his readers; there is nothing of greater importance than what he has to say to them. Second, he writes that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the events of first importance. Third, Paul not only stresses the importance of the events, he interprets them theologically and historically. Jesus died for our sins, a crucial theological statement. He was buried, and He was raised on the third day, which are historical statements. All of this was the historical culmination of Scriptural prophecy. Fourth, Paul asserts that Jesus physically appeared to over 500 people, including Peter and the disciples, James, and Paul himself.

After his stress on the historical death and resurrection, Paul continues by reasoning with his readers concerning the emptiness of Christianity without the resurrection. Ponder these familiar verses and see if one can claim to be a Christian without affirming Paul's reasoning.

[v. 12] Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

[v. 13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; v. 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.

Please note the word *vain* and apply it to what it means to be a Christian. The word also can be translated *empty*. If the resurrection didn't happen historically, Christianity has no anchor; it is empty of ultimate meaning. Jesus is a dead prophet, or He was just another in a long list of religious teachers.

Thank God we can call ourselves Christians because Christ has been raised. There is hope; there is meaning; the Christ of the true Christian is alive.

## **Why Care About History? Because History Touches Our Lives**

Have you ever had amnesia? Do you know someone who has suffered with it? Most of us can't affirmatively answer either of those questions. We can only imagine what it would be like to forget the past. What if you couldn't remember your name or where you were born? What if you couldn't remember your parents, or your spouse, or your children, or any of your friends? These questions help us consider how history touches our lives. In ways we seldom consider, history affects us, both positively and negatively.

We are inseparably linked to people of the past. "Without

examples, without imitation, there can be no human life or civilization, no art or culture, no virtue or holiness.”{6 }Think about ancient Greece, for example. It still lingers in our midst. We have been touched in numerous ways by Greek government, art, literature, and philosophy. People like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle affect contemporary American life, even if we aren’t consciously aware of it.

Now think of Christian history. The Christian who chooses to take history seriously will note that he has a significant lineage. The New Testament book of Hebrews emphasizes this. In chapter 11 the writer reminds us of the faith of biblical characters such as Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, David, Samuel, and many others. In chapter 12 such characters are referred to as a “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) who are to serve as examples to us. Their deeds within space and time are important now. Then the writer focuses our attention on Jesus by stating that Jesus is “ . . . the author and perfecter of faith . . . who . . . endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12: 2). Note that these statements are centered on actions, such as perfecting, enduring, and despising. Such words are indicators of historical events—events that are critical for those of us who apply the word Christian to our lives.

Of course the Christian’s legacy continues beyond the biblical record. Our forefathers’ lives still resonate in our lives. A Roman historian wrote this about the early church: “The contagion of this superstition [Christianity] has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well.”{7} This remarkable analysis provides a stirring picture of our inheritance. Wouldn’t it be marvelous if those who follow us would read that we were equally contagious?

If we were to continue a retrospective of church history, we could consider the lives of people such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Then we could enter our own era and



discuss who we think will leave the strongest legacy. Such thoughts are worthy of contemplation, but there are dangers. That is, we can lose sight of how we are touched by those lives that may never enter a history book. In addition, we may be in danger of belittling how God uses us to impact His kingdom, His history. "One of the obvious features of the experience that fills our lives every day is that we never can know what will flow out of it." {8} So we may not know the result of our history, but we can know that our lives are important. We are leaving a mark within God's kingdom. He honors us as His instruments within history.

## Notes

1. Carl F.H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. II of *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 250.
2. Ibid., 253.
3. Ibid., 281.
4. Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Probe, 1984), 153.
5. Ibid., 12.
6. Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 122.
7. Pliny the Younger, quoted in Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1970), 4.
8. Daniel J. Boorstin, foreword to *The Timetables of History*, by Bernard Grun (New York: Simon and Schuster, A Touchstone Book, 1975).

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A Christian Voice and Martyr

*Todd Kappelman presents a stirring overview of Dietrich Bonhoeffer looking at both his life experience standing against the Nazis and some of his key perspectives on the true Christian life. He was a thought provoking voice for Christianity as well as a famous martyr.*

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

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Man and His Mission

Since his death in 1945, and especially in the last ten years, Bonhoeffer's writings have been stirring remarkable interest among Christians, old and young alike. Thus, we are going to examine the merits of reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We will do this by examining the man and his particular place in the canon of Christian writers, his background and historical setting, and finally three of his most important and influential works.

Bonhoeffer's importance begins with his opposition to the Nazi party and its influence in the German church during the rise of Hitler. This interest led him into areas of Christian ecumenical concerns that would later be important to the foundation of our contemporary ecumenical movements. Many denominational factions and various groups claim him as their spokesman, but it's his remarkable personal life, and his authorship of difficult devotional and academic works, which have gained him a place in the history of twentieth century theology.

Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now part of Poland) and had a twin sister named Sabine. In

1933, before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer, a minister in the Lutheran church, was already attacking the Nazis in radio broadcasts. Two years later he was the leader of an underground seminary with over twenty young seminarians. That seminary is often seen as a kind of Protestant monastery, and is responsible for many of his considerations about the Christian life as it pertains to community. Later the seminary was closed by the Secret Police. In 1939, through arrangements made by Reinhold Niebuhr, he fled to the United States, but returned to Germany after a short stay. He believed it was necessary to suffer with his people if he was to be an effective minister after the war. The last two years of his life were spent in a Berlin prison. In 1945 he was executed for complicity in a plot on Hitler's life.

During the time that Bonhoeffer was in prison he wrote a book titled *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The manuscript was smuggled from jail and published. These letters contain Bonhoeffer's consideration of the secularization of the world and the departure from religion in the twentieth century. In Bonhoeffer's estimation, the dependence on organized religion had undermined genuine faith. Bonhoeffer would call for a new religionless Christianity free from individualism and metaphysical supernaturalism. God, argued Bonhoeffer, must be known in this world as he operates and interacts with man in daily life. The abstract God of philosophical and theological speculation is useless to the average man on the street, and they are the majority who needs to hear the gospel.

We will examine three of Bonhoeffer's most influential and important works in the following four sections. The first work to be considered will be *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1939. This work is an interpretation of The Sermon on the Mount. It calls for radical living, if the Christian is to be an authentic disciple of Christ. The *Ethics*, written from 1940-1943, is Bonhoeffer's most technical theological exposition. It details the problems in attempting to build an

ethical foundation on philosophical or theoretical grounds. Then we will examine more thoroughly *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one of Bonhoeffer's most personal and moving achievements.

## The Cost of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's most famous work is *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1939. This book is a rigorous exposition and interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 9:35-10:42. Bonhoeffer's major concern is *cheap grace*. This is grace that has become so watered down that it no longer resembles the grace of the New Testament, the *costly grace* of the Gospels.

By the phrase *cheap grace*, Bonhoeffer means the grace which has brought chaos and destruction; it is the intellectual assent to a doctrine without a real transformation in the sinner's life. It is the justification of the sinner without the works that should accompany the new birth. Bonhoeffer says of cheap grace:

*[It] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*[\[1\]](#)

Real grace, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, is a grace that will cost a man his life. It is the grace made dear by the life of Christ that was sacrificed to purchase man's redemption. Cheap grace arose out of man's desire to be saved, but to do so without becoming a disciple. The doctrinal system of the church with its lists of behavioral codes becomes a substitute for the Living Christ, and this cheapens the meaning of discipleship. The true believer must resist cheap grace and

enter the life of active discipleship. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting; the Christian must rise and follow Christ.{2}

It is here that Bonhoeffer makes one of his most enduring claims on the life of the true Christian. He writes that “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”{3} Men have become soft and complacent in cheap grace and are thus cut off from the discovery of the more costly grace of self-sacrifice and personal debasement. Bonhoeffer believed that the teaching of cheap grace was the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works.{4}

Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, means strict adherence to Christ and His commandments. It is also a strict adherence to Christ as the object of our faith. Bonhoeffer discusses this single-minded obedience in chapter three of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this chapter, the call of Levi and Peter are used to illustrate the believer’s proper response to the call of Christ and the Gospel.{5} The only requirement these men understood was that in each case the call was to rely on Christ’s word, and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world.{6}

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel we have the story of the rich young man who is inquiring about salvation and is told by Christ that he must sell all of his possessions, take up his cross, and follow. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the bewilderment of the disciples who ask the question, “Who then can be saved?”{7} The answer they are given is that it is extremely hard to be saved, but with God all things are possible.

## **Bonhoeffer and the Sermon on the Mount**

The exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is another important element of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer places special emphasis on the beatitudes for understanding the

incarnate and crucified Christ. It is here that the disciples are called “blessed” for an extraordinary list of qualities.

The *poor in spirit* have accepted the loss of all things, most importantly the loss of self, so that they may follow Christ. Those who *mourn* are the people who do without the peace and prosperity of this world.[\[8\]](#) Mourning is the conscious rejection of rejoicing in what the world rejoices in, and finding one’s happiness and fulfillment only in the person of Christ.

The *meek*, says Bonhoeffer, are those who do not speak up for their own rights. They continually subordinate their rights and themselves to the will of Christ first, and in consequence to the service of others. Likewise, those who *hunger and thirst after righteousness* also renounce the expectation that man can eventually make the world into paradise. Their hope is in the righteousness that only the reign of Christ can bring.

The *merciful* have given up their own dignity and become devoted to others, helping the needy, the infirm, and the outcasts. The *pure in heart* are no longer troubled by the call of this world, they have resigned themselves to the call of Christ and His desires for their lives. The *peacemakers* abhor the violence that is so often used to solve problems. This point would be of special significance for Bonhoeffer, who was writing on the eve of World War II. The *peacemakers* maintain fellowship where others would find a reason to break off a relationship. These individuals always see another option.[\[9\]](#)

Those who are *persecuted for righteousness’ sake* are willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. Any and every just cause becomes their cause because it is part of the overall work of Christ. Suffering becomes the way to communion with God.[\[10\]](#) To this list is added the final blessing pronounced on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. These will receive a great reward in heaven and be likened to the prophets who also suffered.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on suffering is directly connected to the suffering of Christ. The church is called to bear the whole burden of Christ, especially as it pertains to suffering, or it must collapse under the weight of the burden.<sup>{11}</sup> Christ has suffered, says Bonhoeffer, but His suffering is efficacious for the remission of sins. We may also suffer, but our suffering is not for redemptive purposes. We suffer, says Bonhoeffer, not only because it is the church's lot, but so that the world may see us suffering and understand that there is a way that men can bear the burdens of life, and that way is through Christ alone.

Discipleship for Bonhoeffer was not limited to what we can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension. The believer must plunge into the deep waters beyond the comprehension and everyday teaching of the church, and this must be done individually and collectively.

## **Bonhoeffer's *Ethics***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Ethics* was written from 1940-1943. Intended as lectures, this is his most mature work and is considered to be his major contribution to theology.<sup>{12}</sup> Christian ethics, he says, must be considered with reference to the regenerated man whose chief desire should be to please God, not with the man who is concerned with an airtight philosophical system. Man is not, and cannot, be the final arbitrator of good and evil. This is reserved for God alone. When man tries to decide what is right and wrong his efforts are doomed to failure. Bonhoeffer wrote that "instead of knowing only the God who is good to him and instead of knowing all things in Him, [man] knows only himself as the origin of good and evil."<sup>{13}</sup> With this statement, Bonhoeffer entered one of the most difficult philosophical and theological problems in the history of the church: the problem of evil.

Bonhoeffer believed that the problem of evil could only be understood in light of the Fall of mankind. The Fall caused

the disunion of man and God with the result that man is incapable of discerning right and wrong.<sup>{14}</sup> Modern men have a vague uneasiness about their ability to know right and wrong. Bonhoeffer asserted this is in part due to the desire for philosophical certainty. However, Bonhoeffer urged the Christian to be concerned with living the will of God rather than finding a set of rules one may follow.<sup>{15}</sup> And while Bonhoeffer was not advocating a direct and individual revelation in every ethical dilemma, he did believe that man can have knowledge of the will of God. He said that "if a man asks God humbly God will give him certain knowledge of His will; and then, after all this earnest proving there will be the freedom to make real decisions, and [this] with the confidence that it is not man but God Himself who through this proving gives effect to His will."<sup>{16}</sup>

Perhaps our first response to Bonhoeffer is that he appears to be some sort of mystic. However, it is imperative to understand the time in which he was writing, and some of the specific problems he was addressing. World War II was raging and the greatest ethical questions of the century were confronting the church. Good men, and even committed Christians, found themselves on opposing sides of the war. It would be ludicrous to suppose that right and wrong on individual or national levels was obvious, and that there was universal agreement among Christians. In the midst of all of this confusion a young pastor-theologian and member of the Resistance could only advise that believers turn to Christ with the expectation that true answers were obtainable. Such confidence is sorely needed among Christians who face a world devoid of answers.

The strength of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* lies not in its systematic resolution of problems facing the church, but rather the acknowledgment that life is complex and that all systems outside of humble submission to the Word of God are doomed to failure. As unsettling as Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* may be, it is a



refreshing call to the contemporary church to repent and return to a life characterized by prayer, the traditional mark of the early church.

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Correspondence**

Our final consideration of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 for his part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, will center on his *Letters and Papers from Prison* begun in 1942. These letters represent some of Bonhoeffer's most mature work, as well as troubling observations concerning the church in the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century.

The opening essay is titled *After Ten Years*. Here Bonhoeffer identifies with the evil of the times, and especially the war. He speaks of the unreasonable situations which reasonable people must face. He warns against those who are deceived by evil that is disguised as good, and he cries out against misguided moral fanatics and the slaves of tradition and rules.

In viewing the horrors of war, Bonhoeffer reminds us that what we despise in others is never entirely absent from ourselves.<sup>{17}</sup> This warning against contempt for humanity is very important in light of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, whose contempt for the war turned into disillusion with humanity. This is a striking contrast between several witnesses to the war who came to very different conclusions. Bonhoeffer's conclusions were the direct result of a personal relationship with Christ. The conclusions of Hemingway, Sartre, and Camus were the pessimistic observations of those without a final hope.

Bonhoeffer faced death daily for many years and came to some bold conclusions concerning how believers might posture themselves toward this ultimate event. He argued that one

could experience the miracle of life by facing death daily; life could actually be seen as the gift of God that it is. It is we ourselves, and not our outward circumstances, who make death potentially positive. Death can be something voluntarily accepted.{18}

The final question posed in this opening essay is whether it is possible for plain and simple men to prosper again after the war.{19} Bonhoeffer does not offer a clear solution, which may be seen as an insight into the true horrors of the war, as well as an open-ended question designed to illicit individual involvement in the problem.

Long before movies like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *The Thin Red Line*, Bonhoeffer reported on the atrocities of the war. Some of the letters discuss the brutality and horrors of life in the prison camps, and one can certainly ascertain the expectation of execution in many of his letters. The thing that makes these letters so much more important than the popular films is that the letters are undoubtedly the confessions of one who is looking at the war as a Christian. Bonhoeffer was able to empathize with the problems faced by Christians living in such turbulent times.

Bonhoeffer's significance is difficult to assess completely and accurately, but two observations may help as we come to an end of our examination of his work.{20} We must always bear in mind the time of his writings. This explains much that we might at first not understand. Finally, any Christian would do well to read the works of one who gave his life in direct connection with his Christian convictions. There have been many martyrs in this century, but few who so vividly recorded the circumstances that lead to their martyrdom with both theological astuteness and a vision for future posterity.

## Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 30.

2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 54.
4. Ibid., 59.
5. Ibid., 87.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. Ibid., 98.
9. Ibid., 102.
10. Ibid., 102.
11. Ibid., 102.
12. William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1969), 130.
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 19.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethage, trans. Reinhold Fuller and others, [rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967)].
18. Ibid., 17.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. An excellent and more thorough consideration of Bonhoeffer's importance can be found in Eberhard Bethage's [Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Another excellent book for those interested in his life is the biography by Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. These books are full of details about the personal life of Bonhoeffer and offer great insights into his Christian life.

# Christians to Muslims and Jews: “Crusades Were Wrong”

Written by Rusty Wright

Why would modern Christians retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders? To apologize for the atrocities of their ancestors.

Their “Reconciliation Walk,” which ends this summer in Jerusalem on the 900th anniversary of the Crusaders’ storming of the city, has garnered intriguing response across Europe and the Middle East. Representatives of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Judaism, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy will attend the July 15 Jerusalem event.

The Crusades’ outrages have long seemed one of history’s ugly abscesses. The thought of killing to reclaim a “holy land” in “the name of Christ” seems a sick farce.

The Crusaders’ committed horrible atrocities, raping, murdering and plundering Jews, Muslims and other Christians en route to Palestine. When they reached Jerusalem in 1099, blood flowed freely. Jews fled to a synagogue and Muslims to a mosque. Crusaders burned the synagogue, killing about 6,000 Jews, and stormed the mosque, butchering an estimated 30,000 Muslims. They left a legacy of fear and contempt in the Muslim world.

That’s why when Reconciliation Walk leader Lynn Green entered a Muslim gathering at a Turkish mosque in Cologne, Germany on Easter 1996, he didn’t know what to expect. He was in the city where the medieval Crusades began in 1096 with other Christians determined to retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders and apologize to Muslims and Jews for the horrors committed against their forebears in the name of Christ.

The Imam's (leading teacher's) public response was startling. "When I heard the nature of your message," he told the crowd, "I was astonished and filled with hope. I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an epiphany.'" In further conversation, the Imam told Green that many Muslims were starting to examine their sins against Christians and Jews but haven't known what to do, and that the Christians' apology was a good example for Muslims to follow.

125 Christians formally presented the "Reconciliation Walk" statement of apology in Turkish, German and English to about 200 Muslim disciples at the Cologne mosque. Loud, sustained applause followed. The Imam, the most senior imam in Europe, sent copies of the statement to 600 mosques throughout Europe. The Walk was off to a promising start.

The 2000-mile, three-year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey and south to Jerusalem has sought to build bridges of understanding and to turn back over 900 years of animosity among the world's three major religions. Response has been surprisingly warm. Audiences at synagogues and mosques have lauded the gesture, often in tears, and encouraged its proclamation. Nationwide press coverage and government protective escorts in Turkey brought crowds into the village streets to receive the walkers enthusiastically.

The Reconciliation Walk Message says the Crusaders "betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. ...(By lifting up the Cross) they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness and selfless love." The messengers "deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We are simple followers of Jesus Christ who have found forgiveness from sin and life in Him," they explain. "We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ."

The walkers cite Jesus' biblical affirmation that He came to

“proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

Observers have found the Walk absorbing. International School of Theology church history professor Dr. J. Raymond Albrectson called it “a commendable and necessary venture, and better late than never.”

Duke University Professor of Religion Eric Meyers, who is Jewish, commented, “Reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people or Christianity and the Islamic world is certainly a laudable and noble aim.” Meyers hoped that what he called “God’s universalistic vision” would not be overlooked.

George Washington University Professor of Islamic Studies Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim, remarked, “Every effort by both sides to bring Christians and Muslims closer together and to unify them before the formidable forces of irreligion and secularism which wield inordinate power today must be supported by people of faith in both worlds.”

Apologizing for 900-year-old sins won’t restore the lives lost. But in a modern world where religious differences can prompt turf wars and ethnic cleansing, maybe it can provide an inspiring example to emulate.

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# **Christians Retrace Crusaders’ Steps**

Written by Rusty Wright

Lynn Green entered with apprehension a Muslim gathering at a

Turkish mosque in Cologne, Germany, on Easter.

In one of the cities where the medieval Crusades began in 1096, the veteran Youth with a Mission staffer was accompanied by other Christians determined to retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders and to apologize to Muslims and Jews for the atrocities committed against their forebears.

The Muslim imam's public response startled Green and the others. "When I heard the nature of your message, I was astonished and filled with hope," he told the crowd. "I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an epiphany.'" In further conversation, the imam told Green that many Muslims had begun examining their sins against Christians and Jews but have been unclear about what they should do. The repentance offered by Christians because of the Crusades has set an example of apologizing for Muslims to follow, the imam said.

The effort is being called the "Reconciliation Walk." And the 2,000-mile, three-year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey, then south to Jerusalem, seeks to build bridges of understanding and to reverse a legacy of animosity among three of the world's most prominent religions.

In Cologne, loud, sustained applause followed as 125 Christians formally presented the Reconciliation Walk declaration of apology in Turkish, German, and English to about 200 Muslim disciples. The imam, the most senior Muslim teacher in Europe, sent copies of the statement to the 600 mosques throughout the continent. With this achievement, the walk had a promising beginning in April.

## **REMOVING ENMITY**

Green says the purpose of the walk, an independent initiative involving many Christian groups, is to remove enmity and mistrust.

Now, 900 years after the first Crusade, some Muslims and Jews still harbor ill feelings toward Christianity because of the atrocities committed. In turn, many evangelical Christians have disowned the Crusades as a dark chapter of pre-Reformational Christian history, finding it has little to do with their beliefs or practice.

In the eleventh century, Christendom witnessed a feud between the bishop of Rome (the pope) and the patriarch of Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Divided over doctrine, culture, politics, and turf, each excommunicated the other in 1054.

In the meantime, the aggressive Muslim Seljuk Turks advanced on the Constantinople-based Byzantine Empire, ambushing Christian pilgrimages to Palestine. When Byzantine emperor Alexius I appealed to Rome for help, Pope Urban II called in 1095 for a Crusade to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control. Thousands marched, many convinced their efforts would help them gain eternal life.

However, the zealots committed the equivalent of modern-day ethnic cleansing, murdering Jews and warring against Muslims en route to Palestine. In 1099, when they reached Jerusalem, blood flowed freely. Crusaders burned a synagogue into which thousands of Jews had fled and stormed a mosque, slaughtering thousands of Muslims.

## **BETRAYING CHRIST**

Participants in the reconciliation walk are focused on dissolving the ancient divides between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The reconciliation walk message says the Crusaders “betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character.”

By lifting the Cross, “they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness, and selfless love.” The



messengers “deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors.”

“We are simple followers of Jesus Christ who have found forgiveness from sin and life in him,” they explain. “We renounce greed, hatred, and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.” They hope to share their message face to face with 2 million Muslims.

The walk also is designed to heal rifts in Christendom. In Istanbul, an advance team focused on atrocities committed during the fourth crusade, praying for forgiveness at Hagia Sophia and the Galata Tower. The destruction in Istanbul has been a barrier between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

Green says response has been universally positive among the intended audience, although some Christians question the theological basis for contemporary Christians confessing to contemporary Muslims the sins of long-deceased predecessors. When Christians see these results, Green says the theological and historical debates, albeit important, become secondary.

Duke University religion professor Eric Meyers, who is Jewish, says, “Reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people or Christianity and the Islamic world is certainly a laudable and noble aim.”

Meyers says, “In their fervor to bring the ‘true’ message of Christianity to Jews and Muslims, namely, ‘reconciliation, forgiveness, and selfless love,’ I sincerely hope that the participants will not lose track of the import of God’s universalistic vision implicit in Luke (4:18-19) and at the very core of Old Testament eschatology.”

George Washington University Islamic Studies professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim, says, “Every effort by both sides to bring Christians and Muslims closer together and to unify them before the formidable forces of irreligion and secularism, which wield inordinate power today, must be supported by

people of faith in both worlds.”

Organizers are inviting church groups across North America to join the walk. Small groups of a dozen or fewer will go for a week or more to declare the message.

The walk aims to reach Jerusalem in July 1999, the nine-hundredth anniversary of the Crusaders’ invasion of the Holy City.

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## **Church’s Intolerant Past Not a True Representation of Christianity**

The Southern Baptist Convention recently made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church’s intolerant past. That laudable contrition raises a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place?

How did the faith whose founder told people to “love one another” become linked with human bondage, social apartheid and even today’s racist militias?

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so I was saddened by the injustice I saw. A CBS documentary emphasized the Ku Klux

Klan's use of the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in Durham, N. C. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their "longstanding policy of racial segregation." Thereafter, any Blacks present would be handed a note explaining the policy and asked not to return. I was outraged and left the church.

Some 19th-century ministers preached that slavery was a divine decree. In his book, "Slavery Ordained of God," Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God ... to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family." Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom, with Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthening their journeys to bypass Samaria. Once, a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus, who as a Jew surprised people by freely mixing with Samaritans, told a now famous story: The Good Samaritan aided a badly injured Jewish traveler who had been ignored by two passers-by, Jewish religious leaders. Which of the three was the "neighbor"? Obviously, the one who showed mercy.

The power of true faith to reconcile enemies was driven home to me in the '70s by Norton, Georgia state leader of the Black Student Movement, and Bo, a prejudiced White church member. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and his pals assaulted Norton. The animosity was mutual. Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and

grew, his anger mellowed, while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo chose to reject his hypocrisy and follow his faith. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Historical and contemporary examples abound of true faith promoting reconciliation and opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, renounced his old ways, became a pastor and wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton encouraged his Christian friend William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule, in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

In South Africa in 1988, my heart ached as I saw impoverished Black townships and inequality falsely justified by religion. I also saw signs of hope. At a multiracial university student conference, Peter, a white Afrikaner, told me, "All my life, I've been taught the races should be separate. But now because of my faith, I believe we can be one."

Sadly, his efforts to convince his friends back home were frustrating. "Maybe, you can love the Black man," they reluctantly conceded, "but you can't associate with him." Inner change often takes time and hinges on individual willingness.

Two years ago in Cape Town, radical Black terrorists sprayed a multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith's wife, Myrtle, died from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. In spite of his loss, he forgave the killers: "I prayed for those that committed the crime." The pastor explained, "Christian forgiveness doesn't mean that we condone what has happened or that we don't wish

the law to take its course, but that we have no desire for vengeance. We're more determined than ever to contribute toward reconciliation and a peaceful future."

Former Vermont Sen. George Aiken said that if one morning we awoke to discover everyone was the same race, color and creed, we'd find another cause for prejudice by noon. Human hearts need changing.

A young African-American woman heard a speech on this theme in her sociology class at North Carolina State University. "All my life I've been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people," she noted. "Now, I realize those oppressors weren't really following Christ."

The Southern Baptists were right to renounce racism. Other institutions should take note. Racist policies, laws and yes—militias—need changing. But so do human beings. True Christianity does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it by changing human hearts.

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# The Angel Quiz

## Origin and Background of the Angels and Demons

The subject of this essay is angels. The material is presented in a quiz format because we have learned that many people enjoy testing their biblical knowledge in this way. Before going to the quiz, however, a few introductory observations

about angels are in order.

Angels are referred to in 34 of the 66 books of the Bible. They are mentioned 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament.[{1}](#)

The presence of good angels, and evil ones (demons), are recognized in most of the world's religions. Angels are important figures in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, many Christian cults, and in the occult. "The history of various religions from the earliest times shows belief in Satan and demons to be universal...The great ethnic faiths of India, China, and Japan major in demonism, as well as the animistic religions of Africa, South America, and some islands...To an amazing degree, the history of religion is an account of demon-controlled religion, particularly in its clash with the Hebrew faith and later with Christianity."[{2}](#)

Currently interest in [angels](#) is very high in the United States, and many books and seminars are being offered on the subject in an attempt to meet this heightened curiosity about angels.

Unfortunately most of these books and seminars are naive, at best, and more often than not, occultic in orientation. Now let's turn to the quiz.

### **1. What does the word angel mean?**

The basic meaning of the word angel is "messenger." This is significant because a messenger is given a message by a higher person. Much of the contemporary romance with angels sees them as somewhat independent, if not totally autonomous, but a messenger is on a mission from someone higher, in this case from God...or Satan.

### **2. What are some of the other names used of angels?**

Other terms used to describe angels are: ministers, hosts (the

armies of God), chariots, watchers, sons of the mighty, sons of God, elohim (or sons of Elohim), holy ones, and stars.[{3}](#)

### **3. Are angels created or have they always been with God?**

They were created by Christ (Col. 1:15-17; John 1:3).

### **4. When were they created?**

They were created some time prior to the creation of the earth because Job 38:4-7 says that the sons of God (angels) sang with joy when the earth was created.

### **5. What about their appearance? How do angels look?**

When angels appear on earth, they usually have the appearance of adult human males and are often described in the same passage both as men and as angels (Genesis 18:1-2). In Mark 16:5 an angel is described as a young man.

### **6. What do angels wear?**

They are often reported to wear white (Acts 1:10), white robes (Mark 16:15), garments white as snow (Matt. 28:3), dazzling apparel (Luke 24:4), and shining garments (Acts 10:30).

### **7. Is it possible to encounter angels and not recognize them as angels?**

Yes, in Hebrews 13:2 we are warned to show hospitality to strangers because "some have entertained angels without knowing it."

### **8. Do angels really have wings?**

Some angels don't have wings, or, at least, they don't manifest wings. Some clearly do. Cherubim are pictured as having four wings in Ezek. 1:5-12; 10:15; 11:22) and seraphim, as having six wings in Isaiah 6:2.

### **9. How do people react upon encountering angels?**

The reaction varies. Sometimes the people are calm, but usually they experience fear, anxiety, emotional upheaval, terror, or the desire to worship the angels. Mary was greatly troubled at first (Luke 1:28-29); armed soldiers at the tomb shook with fear and became like dead men (Matt. 28:4); John, the author of Revelation, fell at the feet of the angel to worship (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).

## **Angels in the Old Testament**

### **10. What caused the fall of the angels?**

Satan, the leader of the fallen angels, was before his fall the highest of all created beings, but he was consumed with pride and rebelled against God (Ezek. 28:12-19; Isa. 14:12-14). He seduced a third of the angels to follow him in his rebellion (Rev. 12:4). These treacheries brought about his condemnation by God (1 Tim. 3:6) and the condemnation of the other rebelling angels.

### **11. When did they fall?**

They fell some time after their own creation and before the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3).

### **12. Does Satan make his first appearance in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3?**

No, a close reading of the account of man's fall in Genesis 3 reveals that Satan doesn't appear in the Garden of Eden though his influence is felt. Though his name isn't mentioned in the passage, he clearly inspired the actions of the serpent. Later, when God curses the serpent in verse 15, the last part of the curse is directed at Satan.

### **13. What do the opening verses of Genesis 6 have to do with angels?**

There the sons of God took wives from among the daughters of



men. One interpretation of the passage takes the sons of God to mean “angels” as the term is normally used. If this is so, then these angels are the evil angels who, in a very unique occurrence, cohabited with human females and produced unusual offspring. For this heinous sin these angels are kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day (Jude 6). See also 2 Peter 2:4-12.

#### **14. How would evil angels profit by these actions?**

Aside from sensual pleasure, the purpose seems to be that they intended to pollute and pervert the human line. Since Christ needed to be born into the human family and be fully human as well as fully God, a degenerate hybrid-humanity would have prevented Him from being our authentic representative on the cross. This is the reason, some hold, for God’s sending the world-wide flood: to wipe out the polluted line and start over with Noah’s family.

#### **15. Do angels marry?**

No, this is clearly stated in Mark 12:25. It is commonly believed that angels do not procreate and are not a race.[\[4\]](#) (See also Matt. 22:30.) Generally they are portrayed as sexless apart from the difficulties mentioned in question 13.

They are probably sexless in their basic nature but possibly able to assume a variety of forms, just as they are normally invisible but able to manifest themselves when they desire. (See also 2 Cor. 11:14-15.)

Angels are referred to in the Scriptures by masculine word forms though neuter forms were available. They appear on earth as human males, but there is the possibility of a female angel in Zechariah 5:9.

#### **16. What news did the Lord and two angels give Abraham?**

The Lord and two angels (also described as three men and the

Lord and two men) announced that Sarah would have a son and that Sodom would be destroyed.

**17. What happened when the two angels left and went to Sodom?**

The men of that city, not knowing that they were angels, asked Lot to send them outside so they could have sexual relations with them. The angels blinded the men and warned Lot and his family to leave the city because Sodom was about to be destroyed (Gen. 19:1-29).

**18. What famous incident involved Jacob and many angels?**

In Genesis 28 Jacob had a dream of a ladder stretching from earth into heaven, and he saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder. In the dream God gave the land around Jacob to him and to his descendants and proclaimed "in you and in your descendants shall all the earth be blessed" (Gen. 28:10-22).

**19. What is the meaning of this dream and promise?**

It was a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic covenant and indicated that the covenant would go through Jacob's line (not Esau's), that his descendants would be innumerable, and that wherever Jacob went God would be with him. It also looked forward to the coming of Christ through Jacob (Matt. 1:2).

**20. What famous event involved Jacob and one angel? What happened?**

Jacob, while fleeing from his brother Esau, wrestled all one night with an angel and persisted until the angel blessed him. The angel blessed him by changing his name from Jacob, meaning "trickster," to Israel, which means "he who persists with God." The angel also crippled one of Jacob's legs as evidence that the struggle had really occurred and was not merely a dream. The wrestling figure is described as a man and as God in Genesis 32:24-30 and as an angel in Hosea 12:4. So, the angel was probably the preincarnate Christ.

**21. What Old Testament character was greeted by the angel of the Lord by this statement, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior”?**

Gideon (Judges 6:11-12).

## **Angels in the Earthly Life of Christ**

**22. Angels were involved in Jesus birth in several ways. Can you identify all these events?**

The angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19) announced the coming birth of John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus (Luke 1:5-25). Gabriel also announced to Mary, who was a virgin, the miraculous coming birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him not to put Mary away but to marry her because the child she was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was also told to name the child Jesus. When he woke up he did as the angel commanded him (Matt. 1:18-25). On the night of Jesus’ birth, an angel announced the good news to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. Then “suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Luke 1:8-15).

**23. Name the ways angels were involved in Jesus’ life and teachings?**

After the coming of the magi, an angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod’s search for the child. After Herod’s death an angel again appeared to Joseph. He told Joseph to return to Israel (Matt. 2:19-20). When Christ was in the wilderness for 40 days, Satan was tempting Him and the angels were ministering to Him (Luke 4:1-2; Mark 1:13). Jesus taught about angels (Luke 16:22) and about Satan and his demons (Luke 10:17-20). He cast out demons, and He gave the disciples power over demons (Luke 9:1, 37-42). Christ was strengthened by an angel in Gethsemane the night He was taken prisoner (Luke 22:43).

**24. Immediately after He stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Christ was met at the shore by a man who claimed to be demon possessed. What evidence was there that the man was demon- possessed?**

He had been bound, but had superhuman strength and had broken away from all human restraints, even chains; he was naked and lived among the tombs, constantly gashing himself with stones while screaming and crying (Mark 5).

**25. How many demons did he have? What happened to the demons?**

He said he had a legion, meaning literally several thousand. This was probably a figure of speech, but he doubtless had many demons. The demons begged not to be sent out of the country; Christ then sent them into some pigs grazing on a nearby mountainside, and the pigs ran over the cliff into the sea. This is one more evidence of Christ's total control over the demonic world (Mark 5).

**26. How were angels involved after Christ's death?**

On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to visit the grave. Before they got there, "a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord had descended from heaven and rolled away the stone and sat upon it" (Matt. 28:2). Angels at the tomb announced that Christ was risen (Luke 24:4). Immediately after He ascended, two angels appeared and told the disciples that Jesus would return in the same manner that He had departed (Acts 1:10).

## **Angels in the Rest of the New Testament**

**27. What person was described as having the face of an angel?**

Stephen, a young man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, was taken before the Sanhedrin and charged with blasphemy. He began to preach. Then "fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel"

(Acts 6:15). His sermon, however, so angered the Council that they stoned him (Acts 7:1-60).

**28. Who was taken by an angel on a missionary journey? What happened?**

Philip was preaching in the villages of Samaria on his way to Jerusalem when an angel spoke to him and told him to go south on a road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. When he arrived the angel told him to approach an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. Philip explained the passage to the eunuch and baptized him upon hearing his statement of faith in Christ. After they come out of the water, the angel snatched Philip away and set him down in another city where he continued preaching the gospel (Acts 8:25-40).

**29. What is the attitude of the heavenly angels toward God's plan of salvation?**

There is great joy in heaven among the angels of God when a sinner repents and accepts Christ as Savior (Luke 15:10). They are clearly intrigued by what God is doing and long to know more (1 Pet. 1:10-12). They observe with great interest the behavior of the church. In fact in a passage about orderliness in the worship (Christ submitting to God, men submitting to Christ, and wives submitting to their husbands), Paul concludes by writing that women in church should have a symbol of authority on their heads because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:1-10). There are different theories about what all this means, but it seems clear that our behavior is to be respectful to the angels present and perhaps even instructive to them. Remember that the sin of the fallen angels began with Satan's pride, his unwillingness to submit and his desire for prominence.

**30. What individual was freed from prison by an angel?**

Simon Peter (Acts 12:3-10).

### **31. What did the angel do to free Peter?**

He appeared in the cell, struck Peter's side to wake him, caused his chains to fall off his hands, then told him to get up and get dressed, and to follow him. They passed several guards without being seen, then they came to the gate of the city, and it opened by itself. Then the angel vanished.

### **32. Is it possible for an angel to say or teach things contrary to the Scriptures or to God's will?**

Yes, in Galatians 1:8 Paul writes "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed."

### **33. Can angels be deceptive in other ways as well?**

Yes, 1 Timothy 4:1 states: "in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons (fallen angels)."

### **34. What Gentile man was told by an angel to send for Simon Peter?**

Cornelius, a righteous, god-fearing Centurion who gave alms to the Jews (Acts 10).

### **35. Why did the angel direct Cornelius to send for Simon Peter come to Cornelius?**

So Peter could tell Cornelius and his relatives and friends about salvation through Christ. And, so Simon Peter could see further evidence of how God was beginning a great wave of conversions among the Gentiles (Acts 9:32-11:30).

### **36. What happened?**

The Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all those listening to Simon Peter's sermon. They began speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter had them all baptized.

# Future State of the Angels and Demons

## 37. What future roles will the good angels have?

They are sometimes involved in punishing unbelievers (Acts 12:23). They will act as reapers toward the end of the age (Matt. 13:39), be involved in the judgments of the Tribulation (Rev. 8, 9, 16), and live forever with the believers of all ages in the New Jerusalem.[\[5\]](#)

## 38. Will the good angels judge the actions of their former comrades, the fallen angels?

No, believers in their glorified state will judge the fallen angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3). Christ will rule and the believers will rule under Him. Hebrews 2:5 states, "For He did not subject to angels the world to come."

## 39. What happens to the evil angels and Satan?

The evil angels and Satan will finally be judged by God who will cast them into the lake of fire that burns forever (Luke 20:36; Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).

## Notes

1. C. Fred Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 13.
2. Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1971), p. 10.
3. Dickason, pp. 58-61.
4. Ibid., p. 34.
5. Ibid., p. 108.

# Israel's History Written in Advance

According to an old story, the powerful Prussian King Frederick the Great had a chaplain who was a Bible-believer, though Frederick himself was a rationalist. One day, Frederick challenged his chaplain, "In a word, give me a good argument for the God of the Bible." His chaplain, a knowledgeable man, responded, "The Jew, your majesty!" To unpack the chaplain's concise remark is the purpose of this essay.

## Neglected Evidence for the God of the Bible

The history of the Jews is a demonstration of God at work, sometimes miraculously, sometimes providentially, in the affairs of men and nations. The particular significance of the Jews—in contrast to other nations—is that God called Israel His special people and made covenants with them through Abraham, Moses, and David. In addition, the Old Testament predicts what God planned to do with His people. We'll look at three rather wide-ranging prophecies about the nation Israel and see how they have come to pass. These involve first, the covenant curses; second, an acted parable of the marital relations between God and Israel; and finally, a prediction of Israel's return to her own land.

The first area of prophecy involves what God promised to do to the nation of Israel if they did not keep the laws Moses had given them from Mt. Sinai.

When the Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt about 1,400 B.C., God made a contract or covenant with Moses to define Israel's relationship to Him as His own special people. This covenant reminded them of what God had already done for them and what He promised to do in the future. God had saved



them from slavery, brought them safely through the desert, was about to bring them into possession of the land of Canaan, and would protect them from all disasters if they would be faithful to Him. To test their faithfulness, God gave them an elaborate set of laws—some moral, some civil, some ceremonial—which also set them apart from the nations around them. God showed His reality through the lifestyle that He had designed for Israel. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Moses explained it:

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'*

Moses goes on to say only Israel has a God who is near when they pray, and only His people have such righteous laws to guide them.

In the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy and the 26th chapter of Leviticus, the provisions of the covenant are set out in the form of blessings and curses—blessings if Israel would obey God's commands and curses if they disobeyed. Through these sanctions, Israel would be reminded of how they were doing in obeying God, and their neighbors would see an objective demonstration of God's judgment in history.

## **Israel as a History Lesson**

Israel's history demonstrates that when they broke the laws God gave them, they experienced exactly the results God predicted would happen if they were unfaithful. No other nation has prophesied its own downfall with such accuracy. Thus history demonstrates how accurately God predicted what would happen to Israel if they disobeyed His laws. And what did God predict? To summarize nearly a hundred verses,

Israel's disobedience brought wasted effort in labors; natural disasters such as drought, blight, and locusts to their crops; and disease and death to their animals and themselves.

Their enemies would defeat them in battle and besiege their cities, resulting in plague, famine, cannibalism, and starvation. They would be scattered to foreign countries. There some would die; others would live in constant fear of both real and imagined disasters, or turn to other gods. They would be sold as slaves. Their numbers would decline greatly, as they suffered from fearful plagues, prolonged disasters, and lingering illnesses. What an amazing list of disasters!

Not only are these curses severe, but the Bible predicts them in some detail. In Deuteronomy, fourteen verses describe the blessings and fifty-four the curses. In Leviticus, eleven verses are blessings and thirty-two are curses. Altogether, over 75 percent of the verses concern curses for disobedience. God-predicted disasters will be a major part of Israel's future.

This proportion is very unusual. Other religious people might concede that their own history had been three-fourths disaster, but who would admit it had been three-fourths disobedient? And this proportion is borne out not only by the history of Israel recorded in the Bible, where one might claim the biblical history writers either molded the narrative to match the prophecy or adjusted the prophecy to match the history. It is also demonstrated in the long history of disaster experienced by the Jews after the Bible was written.

No other national group has experienced such disaster as the Jews. Most nations have not survived long enough to experience so much disaster! Yet Israel has experienced disaster at every point sketched in the long lists of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They have, unfortunately, been persecuted again and again for over two thousand years. For most of that time they were without a national homeland, having been driven out of

Palestine. They have faced decimation and sometimes genocide from nearly every group they have lived among: Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, Nazis, and Communists. Even now the recently re-established nation of Israel faces continual harassment and threats of annihilation from hostile forces all around her.

In the midst of these curses, however, comes a promise that Israel will not be totally destroyed.

*Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God (Lev. 26:44).*

But as predicted, the Jews still exist as a people today. “Of course!” you say. “If Israel had been destroyed, we would never have heard of them.” Not true – unless they had been destroyed before the coming of Jesus. With the rise of Christianity, the Old Testament was preserved by non-Jews and would have survived whether the Jews survived or not. In fact, many of the threats the Jews have faced came in the past two thousand years. Yet Israel, unlike most oppressed nations of antiquity, has survived as a distinct people.

Thus the evidence from Israel’s predicted covenant curses points to God’s activity in history, keeping His words of both judgment and promise.

## **Israel’s Harlotry**

It’s easy to miss the book of Hosea in the Old Testament. But it describes an amazing parable that would picture Israel’s situation for some two thousand years. The prophet Hosea was divinely directed to live out a powerful parable depicting God’s relationship with Israel.

In chapter 1, Hosea is instructed to marry a harlot, Gomer,

and have children. He obeys, thereby picturing God's choice of the nation Israel for a personal relationship with Him, even though Abraham was an idolater when God called him and the Israelites were idolaters when they were called out of slavery in Egypt.

In chapter 2, Gomer runs off with her lovers. In the same way, Israel abandoned God for the more sexually exciting worship of the Canaanites, even though God had brought the people safely into the promised land. Finally Gomer winds up in slavery, as Israel would later be taken captive to Assyria and Babylon.

In chapter 3, Hosea is directed to go and buy her back. But she is to have no relations with Hosea or with her lovers. This last event in Hosea's living parable is a prediction of the status of Israel for a long time to come:

*For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king . . . in the last days (Hos. 3:4-5).*

Hosea predicted that Israel for "many days" will lack a king, even though God had promised that Israel would never lack a descendant to sit on the throne if the nation was obedient to God.

In fact, the prediction states that Israel will lack even a prince. Since in Hebrew, "prince" means a government official, not the son of the king, Israel would lack both government and king.

Hosea also predicts that sacrifice, pillar, ephod, household idols will be lacking. Two are associated with the sacrificial system and two with idolatry. Sacrifice was an integral part of Israel's covenant and worship. The ephod, a sort of vest, was one of the most important of the ceremonial garments worn

by Israel's high priest. Although some pillars had orthodox uses, the most common reference is to those used in Canaanite worship. Israel was to lose both true worship and the false religion which had been such a problem since it entered Canaan.

This has happened exactly! Since A.D. 44 (the death of Herod Agrippa I), Israel has had no native king to this day. For 1,878 years, from the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to the formation of the modern nation in 1948, Israel had no government of its own either. Thus the predictions regarding Israel's governmental status were fulfilled in detail.

With the loss of the Temple and the priestly garments came the end of the sacrificial system. Israel has not had a high priest to this day. So Hosea's prophecy about the loss of sacrificial worship has also proved true.

From A.D. 70 to 1948, the "sons of Israel" lacked all six items predicted in Hosea 3:4. Now they have a government, but five are still lacking. Hosea 3:4 has been literally fulfilled.

## **A Regathering of Israel?**

In our own generation we may also be seeing the fulfillment of Hosea 3:5. Many Jews have physically returned to Palestine in this century. If their seeking of "God and David their king" is understood as a turning to Jesus as the true Messiah, we can point to the growing Messianic Jewish movement which has flourished in the past two decades. But we are still too close to these events to be sure.

Whether or not Hosea 3:5 refers to Israel's return to the promised land, a number of other Old Testament passages do. Let's look at one such passage, Isaiah 11:11-16. Verse 11 reads:

*Then it will happen on that day that the LORD will again*

*recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.*

Sometime after Isaiah wrote these words, Israel was to be regathered to its homeland. The reference to a “second time” as well as the places from which they would return suggests that this is not the return from the Babylonian exile.

According to the whole passage, several significant features will characterize this return. First, verse 13 suggests that Israel will no longer be two nations as it was after Solomon’s time, but a single unified country . Second, Israel will fight the surrounding nations (the Philistines, the Edomites, The Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Egyptians) as a part of this return (vv. 14-15). Third, something spectacular will happen to dry up the “tongue of the sea of Egypt” and the “River,” presumably the Euphrates (v.15). Fourth, the places from which the return will take place are explicitly named, except for the general phrase “islands [or ‘coastlands’] of the sea” (v.11).

Of these four items, three have already occurred in the return of Jews to Israel in our own generation; only the third has not yet taken place.

The return of Jews to Palestine and the formation of a state of their own is amazing in itself, given that just a century ago the territory was controlled by the Muslim Turks who hated the Jews. Yet a world Zionist movement was formed; the land came under the control of Britain at the end of World War I; Britain allowed the Jews to have a homeland; the Nazi holocaust drove Jews to Palestine who otherwise would have stayed in Europe; the United Nations agreed to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state; and the Jews were able to defeat a coalition of Arab states bent on their destruction.

The Jewish state formed in 1948 in Palestine included persons descended from both the northern and southern tribes. The enmity of the divided kingdoms that existed at Isaiah's time has, in fact, been healed.

Israel has already fought with all the surrounding nations, in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Though the Philistines, Edomites, and such are no longer identifiable as separate peoples, the Arab nations occupying their lands (and most likely including some of their descendants) are Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. These were the nations Israel fought and dispossessed to regain its territory.

Once again, the prophecies of the Bible about the Jews show the God of the Bible to be true.

In this essay we have examined three significant passages in the Bible that predict the history of Israel. We have shown that numerous prophecies from the Old Testament regarding Israel have been fulfilled. We have made the following observations:

1. The Jews would have fierce and repeated persecution and disaster. This has been characteristic of the nation for two thousand years.
2. In spite of such disasters, the Jews would continue to exist as a recognizable people group, in spite of treatment which has destroyed other such people groups.
3. Israel would be without a king for a long period of time. Israel has been without a king for nearly two thousand years, though a Davidic royal dynasty was an important part of the Old Testament revelation.
4. Israel would lack government officials for a long time. Now, after almost 1,850 years, the Jews have them again.
5. Israel would lack sacrifice and ephod, both associated with

God's commands at Mt. Sinai. This has been true for nearly two thousand years and is quite surprising in view of how important sacrifice and the priesthood were in the Old Testament.

6. Israel would lack pillar and idols. This seems obvious today, because the Jews so adamantly worship one God, but the situation was rather different when Hosea made the prediction about 800 B.C.

7. Israel would return to its land as a single united nation. A century ago, such an event would have seemed almost impossible. Palestine was controlled by a Muslim government which had no interest in providing a homeland, much less an independent state, for the Jews. Yet it has come to pass!

8. The countries explicitly named in Isaiah 11 have been nearly emptied of Jews in this return to Palestine.

9. The Jews have fought successfully with the surrounding nations in establishing and maintaining the new state of Israel.

Sadly, some elements of the Christian church have ignored or participated in the persecution of God's special covenantal people, the Jews. Yet Romans 9-11 exhorts Christians never to rejoice in the misfortunes of the Jews. To do so brings shame to the church and to our Lord.

As we look at God's hand in the history of Israel it may seem fierce to us, for at least two reasons: first, we regularly ignore the biblical teaching that there is a life beyond this one, and that in the last judgment with its rewards and punishments everything will be made right, and no one will get less than he or she deserves; and second we regularly minimize our own sin, blaming our actions on circumstances and environment. Whatever may be the faults of our parents, teachers, or society, God will apportion to them (and us!) exactly what we deserve—unless we accept the offer of God's



forgiveness through believing on Christ as our personal Savior.

Are all the predictions we have listed trivial? Did they just happen by chance? Or is the God of the Bible indeed the One who controls history and who announces the end from the beginning? The decision is yours.

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