

“Am I Judging When I Recognize Sin in a Friend’s Life?”

Dear Sue,

My question is about judging. There are several of us friends and we are all Christians but go to different churches. One of our friends was widowed several years ago. After several failed relationships where she became sexually intimate with each of the men, she is now in another relationship with what seems like a nice man. She is also very active in her church and is involved in a discipleship ministry. After she leaves the meetings to prepare for these discipleship events, she leaves town to go stay the weekend with her new friend.

I told one of the other friends that I did not think it was right that she was doing that and that may be why she had problems with her relationships, and that I felt it was wrong that she would be speaking before another group of women on this retreat. My other friend told me I was judging and that only God should do that and no one is without sin and that one sin is no greater than any other sin. I do not interpret the bible that way. I feel that if she is putting herself before others as a leader of God she should be striving to live sin free and be repenting when she does sin. Am I judging when I recognize a sin in another person’s life? I do not want to be a judgmental person and am very confused about this. Please help me to understand and how I should have responded to her.

You are right. There is a huge misunderstanding about judging both outside and inside the church, and it comes from not knowing what the Bible teaches about judging. Everybody seems to stop with “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matt. 7:1). That is the Lord Jesus’ call not to judge hypocritically. But in

John 7:24 He also calls us to judge rightly. And remember the passage about pulling the plank out of our own eye so we can see clearly to remove the speck from our brother's eye (Matt. 7:5)? That's about judging as well. The point there is about examining ourselves first before dealing with another's sin, *not* to ignore other people's behavior.

But then there's the "big daddy" passage of 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

This passage clearly says that we are to judge those inside the Body of Christ. (News to your other friend, I'm sure!) Judging doesn't mean condemning, though; in the case of your immoral friend, it would be a matter of comparing her behavior with what is right, and pointing out the dangers of her choices, the way we would want to warn someone in a burning building to get out, or urge someone headed toward a cliff to turn around.

It might sound like, "This is a hard conversation but I need to talk to you because I care about you. You're making decisions that are not consistent with the Christ-follower and the woman of God I know you want to be. Sexual immorality is still sin, and sin has consequences, and I don't want you to

be hurt. But even more than that, you are dishonoring the Lord by your disobedience to His word. I am concerned that you are continuing in a leadership position while you are engaged in unrepented, continual sin. James 3:1 says that teachers will be judged more strictly, and I am concerned for what that might look like for you down the road. I just want to plead with you to choose chastity and integrity, and make choices that honor both God and yourself.”

If she gets defensive and starts pushing back, making comments like, “And you’re so perfect yourself?” I would counsel you to not get defensive yourself. Just say something like, “You know, I’m aware that I’m a sinner in need of God’s mercy and grace every single day. I would hope that if my eyes were blinded by my own feelings and sin and I were headed toward a cliff, you would love me enough to warn me and challenge me to live consistently with who God says I am.”

I’m so glad you wrote. I hope you find this helpful.

Sue

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“Is Clairvoyance Wrong?”

A lady popped into one of our meetings recently who said she is clairvoyant and has worked with tarot cards in the past. Someone in another church had told her it was wrong so she got rid of her tarot cards but wants to know if her gift of clairvoyance is also wrong and what to do about it. She said she has had dreams of disasters, etc. before they have happened and they have been reported as she “saw” them. We are a church who operates in the prophetic but I was at a loss how

to explain the difference in “layman’s” terms. I know one is in the occult but have never met anyone who said they had correct predictions before as I always believed Satan could not predict the future and now I am a little confused as to how to explain it.

Clairvoyance is indeed a manifestation of the occult. Satan has all kinds of supernatural knowledge (although he is not omniscient) so we shouldn’t be surprised when he feeds people knowledge of some future events. Particularly since this lady has worked with tarot cards, which is another open door to the occult, someone needs to explain to her how important it is to renounce her openness to the enemy’s power and secret knowledge because if power and knowledge don’t come from God, they are coming from an evil source which will prove to be harmful eventually.

The biblical standard for prophets, either fore-telling or forth-telling, is 100% accuracy (Deut. 18:22). Clairvoyance is a demonic counterfeit to the way the Holy Spirit gives knowledge supernaturally, and this lady can probably identify at least one dream or vision or thought that did not come to pass or in which she got a detail wrong because unholy and UN-omniscient Satan cannot perfectly mimic the actions of our perfectly holy God.

Concerning what to do about it, the way to slam shut the open door to the kingdom of darkness is to repent of participating in occult activities which God has forbidden for our own protection, and to “renounce the deeds of darkness” (Rom. 13:12) in Jesus’ name. For further information, check out Neil Anderson’s book *Victory Over the Darkness*.

So glad you wrote! I hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

© 2010 Probe Ministries

See Also:

["What's the Difference Between a Prophet and a Clairvoyant?"](#)

"I Don't Feel God's Love or Presence"

I don't feel God's presence or love. I know this sounds like a nonchristian "question," but I know 100% I am a Christian! I've been through so many hard things in my life; for instance, my dad, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, died of brain cancer when I was a little kid. That's just one thing. It feels like the more and more I live for God, the more my life falls apart. I feel like He has abandoned me. I know David wrote in the Psalms about feeling alone, but I've never heard about anyone not feeling God's love. Please help! I feel completely alone!

I'm sorry for the loss of your father. I'm truly devastated to hear that you don't feel God's presence. If you think you're the only one to feel that way, please don't. I certainly have felt isolation and separation from God. Sometimes it was the result of my unrepentant sin. Other times, I felt that calamity had unfairly fallen on me and wondered if God cared about my situation. Despite it all, I'm still here. I'm still a Christian and a stronger believer because of the things I've suffered.

King David experienced much grief and despair during his reign over Israel. When he wrote much of the book of Psalms, he did not just include the happy times of life; he included the full

range of negative emotions: bad, sad, melancholy, depression, hopelessness, fear, sorrow, hurt, anger—you name it. Psalm 88 is probably the epitome of the depths of human brokenness. He felt as if he were in the darkest depths, surrounded only by unrelenting grief. David felt the terrible sting of death—those who were closest to him were taken away and he himself felt abandoned and forgotten by God (which is like death itself). The king had no idea why terrible things were happening to him and his soul was in anguish because of it.

In the face of terrible suffering, there is one thing David never included in the Psalms—faithlessness. Even at the deepest valley of his misery, David gave God praise and appealed his case before the Lord. He understood that no matter what happens, it is the Savior-God to whom he could appeal and the Savior-God who brings peace.

But also know this. God did not create us to be alone and to suffer alone. God called us as believers to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). I would ask you to express your situation to someone you trust for spiritual support. I appreciate your email to us, but you would do yourself wonders if you could interact face-to-face with a trusted friend, church member, minister, or pastor. If your dad was a professor at DTS, then I’m certain the counseling services are open and available to you. I hope this helps. Remember, God is not far from each of us (Acts 17:27). God has said that He would never leave us, nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Be encouraged that you have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the guarantee that you are God’s cherished child (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). God is always there for you.

Nathan Townsie

P.S. My colleague at Probe, Sue Bohlin, also had some thoughts she wanted to share with you.

_____, many, many people have trouble feeling God’s love, but

they don't feel free to talk about it. There are a number of reasons for the obstacles to experiencing His love, and while I can't know the answer in your case, maybe one or more of these might resonate with you.

First, as I'm sure you know, we live in a fallen world. Nothing works right, including our "feelers." Sometimes our perceptions malfunction. Sometimes we can sense that there are feelings deep in our souls but we can't access them. Life can be like a radio with a broken antenna, unable to pick up the radio signals that are present in the room but we're unable to receive them.

Sometimes we shut our feelers down after a painful experience or trauma, believing that it just hurts too much, and we make a private vow to not feel anything. The trauma of losing your father wounded you and shaped you forever, and I am so very sorry to learn of this. Do you think it's possible you decided, years ago, to shut down your heart so you wouldn't feel the pain of loss and grief from the father-shaped hole in your heart?

The good news is that God is able to heal broken receivers, broken feelers. We need to give ourselves permission to open ourselves up to both the negative and the positive emotions that are part of life, and ask Him to bring healing to our "feelers." Many people report that when they renounced their inner vow to not feel anything, God gradually restored their ability to feel again.

Secondly, if we're angry at God, it's really hard to feel His love because the anger gets in the way. I get that—I spent the first twenty years of my life angry at God because He allowed a trauma to shape my life in painful ways. It took me some time to get to the point where I grasped the truth of His sovereignty, the fact that He is in total control, which is balanced by His goodness. If God allows something painful into our lives, it's because He has a plan to redeem every bit of

the pain. I'd love to share my story with you, "How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change" here:

www.probe.org/how-to-handle-the-things-you-hate-but-cant-change/. You may also benefit from "The Value of Suffering" here: www.probe.org/the-value-of-suffering/)

Third, different people have different ways of experiencing God's love. Recently, a friend was thinking about the fact that he has trouble feeling loved by his heavenly Father because of his relationship with his earthly father. While on vacation, he wondered what it would take for him to feel God's love, and at that moment he heard the squawk of a flamingo. He turned toward the sound of the animal and smiled with pleasure, and was suddenly aware that he had been touched by an evidence of God's love through His creation. Be on the lookout for unexpected ways that God says "I love you!" I send this with a prayer that God meets you in your feeling of aloneness and assures you of His love.

Sue Bohlin

© 2010 Probe Ministries

"God Forbids Fornication, But Webster's Definition Is Limited. Other Sex Okay Then?"

[Editor's Note: Probe received a lengthy, technical question regarding this topic which quoted the Merriam Webster online dictionary (www.m-w.com). The definitions of the [related terms](#)

were unnecessarily graphic, but the gist of the question was this:]

Having read your Q & A section regarding sexuality and your article [How Far Is Too Far?](#), I would appreciate your valued opinion in my response to this article. What is the boundary of illicit (premarital) sexual activity? Does it include orgasms without direct interaction of the couple's sexual organs, which is basically the dictionary definition of intercourse? Can one engage in sexually pleasurable activities without crossing the line to fornication?

Thanks for the question. Well, the explanation you gave is certainly creative. You obviously spent plenty of time deliberating your argument and giving an inductive explanation. But I do notice some moral gaps that need to be addressed.

First, Merriam-Webster's dictionary is not a repository of God's holy standards. A dictionary can only give a brief technical definition of a word. We define right and wrong according to what the Bible says, not the limited definitions crafted by men.

There is no loophole by which we escape the standard of God. A dictionary has a scientifically sterile definition; the Bible is much more expansive. The dictionary focuses what happens physically for fornication to occur; the Bible focuses on what happens in the heart for fornication to occur.

Jesus gave us our highest standard of sexual sin in Matthew 5:28 when he said, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." For Jesus, it was not just about the physical act of sin; it was the mental and spiritual act of sin. The Lord's standard of sexual immorality focused on the person's heart and their intent.

In reading your argument, it appears quite obvious that what

you described is a sexual act by merely examining the result. The end game of sexual activity is sexual gratification. In the eyes of God, how you get there is less important than arriving at a place of sin. The touching of one another's genitals while kissing heavily until there is a sexual climax is a sexual act. It is obvious that you are describing the touching of a sexual organ, stimulating it for pleasure, and having a sexual release. That description is a classical physical definition of sex.

In your hypothetical description, you stated there was prolonged and pronounced kissing. I will borrow from the logic of our previous article you cited:

Scripture says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1). One of the meanings for the Greek word for "touch" means "to press against in such a way as to kindle or catch on fire." So another way to translate this verse would be, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman so that they become sexually aroused."

I can guarantee that a person's thoughts will not be pure in those moments of kissing and touching.

What is also obvious from your description is the intent of the act itself. You looked up the dictionary's definition of sex, and then devised activities that have the same sexual pleasure of sex while avoiding the technical aspects of intercourse. The intentionality of the act is what separates two similar actions from one that is acceptable versus one that is sinful. For example, touching your boyfriend's/girlfriend's genitals would be sin because the touching is for sexual pleasure. By contrast, a nurse touching someone's genitals for a checkup is not sin because of the intent (medicinal analysis).

As believers, we are to honor God; not gratify our fleshly desires. When we try to rationalize questionable actions, we

are not abiding by the Spirit of God. We are to control ourselves in a way that is holy and honorable (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). If we ever have doubts as to what is godly or not, we can ask ourselves this question: If Jesus were standing here, would he approve of my actions? The answer to that question will lead us to an answer that upholds God's Word, His Will, and our integrity.

I hope that answers your question.

Nathan Townsie

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“If Those Who Can't Choose God Go to Heaven, Why Give Us a Choice?”

I read at Probe.org some of the answers to the question of [whether babies are in heaven](#), and they still did not answer my question—IF the mentally retarded and infants are in heaven because of God's grace (before I go on, please don't think I am being disrespectful, because I love the Lord), then why did He create US with choice? Will the babies be grown up in Heaven and the formerly mentally retarded be complete? If so, how can God have a perfect relationship with them, if they have never been given a choice to choose against Him, like we were? Why didn't He just make us all that way?

Thanks for the question. Sorry to hear that the other articles didn't cover it for you, but your question is one that has no easy “one-size-fits-all” answer.

As earlier established, it is by God's grace that babies, and those too mentally handicapped to make a choice for or against Christ, go to heaven. One of the rationales for that belief is Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used illustrations of children to highlight the kind of character that would be present in heaven. In Matthew 18:1-4, Jesus tells about the humility found in children that serves as a guiding principle for all who wish to enter eternal paradise of God. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus described the sincere faith and genuine trust necessary for those who are in heaven. He asserted that children have a recognized place in the kingdom (Matthew 18:10) for they (and by extension, the mentally challenged who cannot progress beyond a child-like mentality) illustrate the kind of spirit an adult must have to experience a place in God's kingdom^{1}.

Granted, deceased children and the mentally challenged do not have the option of belief; their development ended before the age of accountability where they could make a mature decision of trust^{2}. However, Christ died for all (Romans 6:10); the debt of sin was paid in full once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). Unless someone deliberately rejects that offer of grace, the offer still stands. Children and the mentally challenged cannot believe nor disbelieve, therefore they have not rejected Christ's atonement. The cancelled debt of sin is still valid on their account.

But, I think I understand the core of your question. It seems that you are asking this: why do babies, children, and the mentally challenged get a "free pass" to heaven without having to go through the angst and struggle that comes from the life of faith? Why do they get to go to heaven scot-free while adults have to struggle with the issue of choice and the resulting dilemma of eternal damnation?

Every human being is born with the potential of choice. It's in our DNA. It's a part of being human. Babies, children, the mentally challenged—all of us were born with the capacity for

choice and free will. When those who cannot believe die, the full potentiality of their choice is cut short and they cannot fully exercise that capacity. They do not have any accountable works to speak against their character, therefore God ushers them into His presence. It may seem that it would be preferable to simply die as a child to assure one's place in heaven. But we must remember two things: First, as humans in the image of God, we were created for more than just heaven. If we were created simply for heaven, we would not have physical bodies, nor would we be resurrected in bodily form. Our created purpose was to be a physical representation of God's presence on the earth. Second, there is a trade-off in the premature death of a baby versus the full life of an adult. Babies and the mentally challenged do not have to experience the angst of choice and the struggles of faith but they also miss out on earthly life itself. A full earthly life can include the joy of a family and the shared happiness that comes from strong lifelong friendships. Adults have the opportunity to find and experience love on many different levels: platonic, fraternal, casual, romantic, and spiritual. Those who are Christians share in the fellowship of their spiritual family and are indwelled with the filling of the Holy Spirit.

People past the age of accountability do have the eternally crucial decision of choosing rightly of whether to follow Christ or not. They have supernatural assistance from God in the power of the Holy Spirit. In deliberation with our free will, God is there to assist us in our choice and interacts with our spirits to help us make an informed decision (John 16:8-11). Though the choice can be difficult for some, God illuminates the truth and testifies to our spirit that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

Finally, we simply cannot argue with how God decides to give his grace. The classic example is the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), where some of the workers

were angry with the justice of the landowner . A landowner decided to hire workers to work in his vineyard, so he hired help throughout the day. The workers who were hired at the end of the day did not work that long, yet they were paid a denarius (a full day's salary). The workers hired in the early morning sweated and toiled in the heat, yet they too were paid a denarius. Those who bore the brunt of the labor grumbled against the landowner and asked why those who performed less labor received the same payment as those who worked all day.

The analogy holds for babies and the mentally challenged. Babies and the mentally challenged have not made a profession of faith or lived a life of struggle against sin and temptation. Nor have they had to face the real possibility of hell, yet they are ushered through the gates of heaven. Adult believers have the task of coming to trust in Jesus and obeying the will of the Father, or face the possibility of eternal condemnation.

The landowner's response to the hired men is the same response that our Father gives us. This is not an occasion for anger or jealousy but an opportunity for grace. God wants to extend his mercy to all and we should be happy with the reward set before us. We should not be envious that those who cannot believe get to experience the same honor as those who have borne the scars of struggles and difficulties. We should celebrate because we know that those individuals – the babies, the children, and the mentally challenged- are in a better place and are safe in the arms of our Lord when they die.

You asked why God created us with choice. You may find this answer to email helpful: [“Why Did God Create a Flawed World Where Eve Could Eat the Forbidden Fruit?”](#)

I hope that answers your question.

Nathan Townsie

Notes

1. Lightner, Robert P. *Safe in the Arms of Jesus: God's Provision for Death for Those Who Cannot Believe*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000.

2. The age of accountability was the age that God considered a person to be morally responsible for his/her own behavior. In Jewish culture, age thirteen was the age that a person was considered to be a full member of the community and thus responsible for his/her sins. In Christendom, there is no definitive age; it is left to the discretion of the Lord.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“Is Shopping at Goodwill Thrift Store For Poor Only?”

I shop at Goodwill. The lady who hems things up for me expressed concern about those who take from the poor by shopping at thrift stores. She believes it's wrong to shop there if you're not poor and in dire financial straits. I believe that Goodwill helps me be a better steward of my resources whether I'm underemployed or not. I chuckle at other shoppers who saunter into the store in fur coats or driving Hummers. I see this as an opportunity to engage in a deeper discussion about Worldviews and ultimately point to my Saviour if handled correctly. What are your thoughts on this?

Thanks for the question. In all honesty, it sounds like your seamstress has some grave misunderstandings about thrift stores. How unfortunate! If I understand their business model correctly, they accept donated clothes and furniture from individuals/companies and then sell the items for profit. The donors receive a tax deductible receipt that can be used to

lower their individual or corporate taxes. The proceeds that come from these items are then used to support local homeless shelters and other charitable endeavors.

Everyone has a right to shop where they want. Goodwill is not limited to, or intended for, the poor; if the poor were the only ones who shopped there, Goodwill would not have the financial resources to remain open. The company needs to convert donated items into cash to fund the many generous efforts they support.

As a Christian, we are called to be good stewards of our money. If we can save money by shopping at Goodwill, then by all means, do it. However, we should always make sure that our purchases are meaningful and necessary, not frivolous and materialistic.

I like your idea of using this opportunity to discuss worldviews! It sounds like a good chance to practice using one or more of the “Four Killer Questions” that spur critical thinking skills (see www.probe.org/four-killer-questions-2/).

I hope this helps. Bless you!

Nathan Townsie

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“Are There Really Three Archangels in the Bible?”

I guess I was told (and believed) that there were three archangels. In my Sunday School class this past weekend the leader said there is only one, Michael. I see that Michael is

the only one explicitly listed in the Bible but I think Gabriel is inferred as an archangel. What do you say?

Thanks for the question. To start, an archangel is a high ranking or principal angel. There are two archangels mentioned in the Scriptures: Michael and Gabriel. The identification of Michael as an archangel is more explicit, as you mentioned earlier (Jude 1:9) than Gabriel. However, a case for Gabriel can be seen implicitly. Gabriel's Old and New Testament appearances come during great moments of salvation history, confirming his important rank in the celestial order. Michael is mentioned in Daniel 10:13, 10:21, 12:1, Jude 1:9, and Revelation 12:7. Gabriel is mentioned in Daniel 8:15-19, 9:21-23, Luke 1:19, and Luke 1:26.

The reason why you might have been taught that there were three archangels is that in the Roman Catholic tradition, they include the archangel Rafael. The mention of Rafael comes from the [apocryphal](#) writing, the Book of Tobias. Apocryphal writings are considered useful and beneficial by Protestants, but not canonical due to their late dates of inscription.

I hope this helps.

Nathan Townsie

© 2010 Probe Ministries

**“Are the Gifts and Calling of
God ‘Irrevocable,’ or**

'Without Repentance'? Which One is Right?"

The KJV translation says in Romans 11:29, ". . . for the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance." But the other translations say, ". . . for the gifts and calling are irrevocable." Which is the correct one?

The Greek term used in Romans 11:29 is *ametameletos*. It is essentially the negation of the term *metamellomai* which, according to the Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament can mean: (1) feel remorse, become concerned about afterward, regret (Matt. 27:3); (2) change one's mind, think differently afterward (Heb. 7:21). Thus, if we negate these meanings, the term in Romans 11:29 can really be translated either way, although for contemporary readers it is probably best to translate as "irrevocable" or "incapable of being changed," for this more clearly communicates the idea to most people today. The phrase, "without repentance," tends to be a little more archaic, which one would expect for the KJV, as it was originally published in 1611.

Hope this helps.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“I Am Offended by Your Biased Article About Islam”

I have just read your article titled “[Islam and the Sword](#).” What is very obvious is that there is A LOT of bias and misinformation in your article about Islam, Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), etc. It is very offending and I want you to neutralize your article completely. Objectivity is important if you want to be considered a credible writer and it is clear you are not at all.

You wrote, “Although considered only human, one Muslim writer describes Muhammad as “[T]he best model for man in piety and perfection. He is a living proof of what man can be and of what he can accomplish in the realm of excellence and virtue. . . .”{4} So it is important to note that Muhammad believed that violence is a natural part of Islam.” Where is the logic in this??? Especially in the last sentence. How did you move from saying that Prophet Mohammad, the best of all human beings, embodies perfection and virtue and then say he believed violence was an integral part of Islam? Where are your references? The verses that you took out of context? Any decent person is aware that no religion condones violence or bloodshed and I am telling you Islam is not an exception.

The Badr incident did not occur the way you wrongfully relate it. What you say about jihad and the Holy Prophet’s life is ridiculous and immature. I should not and will not justify that Islam is a peaceful religion and loves the other monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam). Rather, I am asking you to thoroughly research your ideas before publishing them on the web site, which needs to be cleaned from bias and misinformation.

Thank you for taking the time to express your views regarding my essay on Islam and the sword. I am sorry that you believe

my information to be in error. I would be interested in your description of the Badr incident. The Oxford History of Islam describes it as one of a number of raids launched against Meccan caravans in order to seize booty and hostages. I would assume that this was accomplished violently rather than peacefully. I am under the impression that Muhammad's depiction as a warrior and political leader is not very controversial.

My point regarding the life of Muhammad and the model he represents is simple. If Muhammad is to be considered the ultimate model within Islam for human behavior, and if he used violence as a tool to further Islam, then violence is a natural part of Islam.

The idea that no religion condones violence is just not the case. The Norse gods of Germania and Scandinavia worshipped Odin, the god of war. Human sacrifice was a central feature of the Aztec religion in Central America. Religion has been used to condone warfare and violence.

I doubt that anyone writes on history or religion without a bias. But, I do feel that accuracy is important.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

© 2010 Probe Ministries

“What Can You Tell Me About

the Infancy Gospel of James?"

Can you give me some information on the writings of the Protoevangelium of James [also known as the "Infancy Gospel of James"]? I know that has to do with proving the hows and whys that Mary was a perpetual virgin. Can you give me some historical background of it and how we as Protestants refute that heretical teaching?

Thanks for your letter. You can find some helpful scholarly information on this gospel here: www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html The introductory article offers some useful background information. To simply highlight a couple of important points:

1. Our earliest manuscript of this gospel dates to the third century. However, the text itself probably dates to the middle of the second century. This fact, combined with the fact that the historical James (the brother of Jesus) was put to death by Ananias in 62 A.D., clearly make it a pseudonymous work (i.e. it was not actually written by James, the brother of Jesus).

2. In addition, the work is clearly dependent on the infancy narratives found in Matthew and Luke.

3. Since it was not written by James, the brother of Jesus, and since it clearly contains mythological embellishments and historical inaccuracies, the early Fathers of the church were wise not to include the book in the New Testament canon.

4. Finally, for more information on the criteria of canonicity, please see the section entitled "The Formation of the New Testament Canon" in my article on "Redeeming the Da Vinci Code" here: www.probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/. Actually, the entire article has much information that is relevant as background material to your question.

Concerning the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity: although Roman Catholics believe that Mary remained a virgin throughout her entire life, this doctrine seems biblically problematic. In Matthew 1:24-25 we learn that Joseph took Mary as his wife, but "had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." The verse seems to clearly imply that Joseph and Mary did have normal sexual relations after the birth of Jesus. And this is confirmed by references to Jesus' brothers and sisters in Matthew 13:55-56.

But could these have been children of Joseph from a previous marriage, as some Roman Catholic teachers have suggested? This does not seem to be a very plausible explanation; indeed, it has a very serious difficulty. As one commentator has observed: "Joseph could not have had children by a previous marriage, as some suppose, for then Jesus would not have been heir to the Davidic throne as the oldest son of Joseph." Hence, the most plausible interpretation of the biblical evidence is that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Jesus, but afterward conceived and bore other children via normal sexual relations with her husband, Joseph.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn