“Why Didn’t God Just Not Create the People Who Wouldn’t Believe in Him?”

I have a question about God’s omniscience versus the existence of hell. I know the Bible says (and I believe it) that God is good and loving, as well as holy and just. It also says that He is omniscient, knowing the end from the beginning, and knowing from eternity-past the choice that every human being that ever lived/will live will make – either to accept His offer of eternal life, or to reject it.

If both of these statements are true and biblical, my question is this: If God knew (even before creation) that millions of people would make the choice to reject Him (and thus end up in hell by their own choice), why did He simply not create them in the first place? I know this might sound simplistic, but why would He create all of those people who would ultimately reject Him and end up in hell, if He KNEW that would be their final and eternal destination? (A non-Christian friend of mine calls it “a cruel joke.”)

This is a tough question. I was tempted to write back and say, “We just don’t know,” and ultimately that’s probably true. “Why” questions are about motives, and unless someone tells us, it’s awfully hard to read another person’s mind. . . especially God’s! But as I thought more about it, I realized that I COULD pass on the observation that our choice is a precious thing to God because choice is the foundation for true love. If God didn’t create the people who wouldn’t choose Him, then that would be the equivalent of removing the choice.

At any rate, He did, and He knows what He’s doing, and I guess we just need to trust Him.

I think we need to see the Lord as reluctantly letting people

choose hell instead of gleefully sending them there. He doesn't want ANYONE to perish (2 Peter 3:9), but some insist on it. That's not cruel on His part, it's a way of supporting our choices.

Nonetheless, the bottom line is that it's a mystery. Non-believers aren't going to trust His heart when they don't trust anything about Him in the first place, are they?

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"How Can a Just God Order the Slaughter of Men, Women and Children?"

I am a Christian and spend time talking with others often about God, but I have been speechless when they bring up the issue, for example, in I Samuel 15:1-3 where God tells His people to destroy the men and the women and children as well. This is difficult to see that as part of His character. Is that a just God? What was He thinking?? I understand that the Amalekites ambushed them when travelling from Egypt but why the women and children?? I would really appreciate your reply. Thank you.

This is indeed a question often asked by critics of the Bible. It is a legitimate question and one that deserves a comprehensive, complete and, hopefully, acceptable answer. So let me see if I can address it.

One of the most important rules of Hermeneutics (the task of

interpretation, meaning of a verse or passage of Scripture) is to observe the *context* of what you are seeking to interpret correctly. This is crucial in seeking to answer this question you have raised. We need to see clearly the historical background and the situation which called for such severe measures to be taken.

Who were the Canaanites?

Canaan, the Bible tells us, was the fourth son of Ham, who was one of the three sons of Noah. The use of the word "Canaan" stems from the fact that Canaan's descendants populated the land which was later called Palestine, and now is called Israel. Modern Syria is also included and it is roughly the same land which God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21; Numbers 34:1-12).

The Amalekites which you mentioned were one of several tribes which are often referred to collectively as either Canaanites or Phoenicians. Their language was either Ugaritic or Phoenician, two Semitic dialects close to the Hebrew dialect. Other major "Canaanite" tribes included the Amorites, Jebusites, Hivites, Girgasites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites. The Phoenicians were a sea-faring people who lived along the Mediterranean Coast. They also had colonies which included Cypress, Sardinia, and Carthage.

What were their Religious beliefs and practices?

Archaeology has given us substantial material about these people, and particularly from their capital city, Ugarit. Thousands of clay tablets have been recovered from Ras Shamra in northern Syria, including the libraries of two great temples dating from the 15th-14th century B.C. Much of this epic literature has to do with their religious practices and their pantheon of gods. Merrilll F. Unger notes that Canaanite cultic practices were more base than any other place in the ancient Near East. (*Unger's Bible Dictionary,* p.172). Let me

list some of the features of their religious beliefs and practices.

The Canaanite Pantheon (of gods)

A full description of the Canaanite gods has been provided by C. R. Driver, who translated the Ras Shamra tablets found in the ancient city of Ugarit.

El
The head of the Canaanite pantheon. El was generally a rather remote and shadowy figure, but sometimes stepped down from his eminence and became the hero of exceedingly "earthy" myths. He is described as living at a great distance ("a thousand plains, ten thousand fields,") from Canaan, and to this remote spot the gods invariably had to travel when they wished to consult him.

El was called the "father of years," the "father of man," and also the "father bull," i.e. the progenitor of all the gods. He is likened to a bull in the midst of a herd of cows and calves. According to the text, El had three wives: Astarte (goddess of the evening star), Asherah (goddess of the sea and consort to Baal), and Baaltis—all three his sisters. He is a brutal, bloody tyrant, whose acts caused all the gods to be terrified by his decisions. For example, he dethroned his own father ("Heaven, Uranus") and castrated him; he killed his own favorite son, "Iadid," and cut off his daughter's head. The tablets also portray El as seducing two women, whose names are not mentioned, and he allows them to be driven into the desert after the birth of two children, "Dawn" (shahru) and "Sunset" (shalmu). W. F. Albright in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages, XXXV,* comments that the description of the act of seduction of these two women is one of the frankest and most sensuous in ancient Near-Eastern literature.

Baal and Mot
Baal is the great storm-god. He brings the rain, and announces

his present with thunder and lightning and, most important of all, the needed rain which would insure a good harvest. He became the reigning king of the gods, and was enthroned on a lofty mountain in the far northern heavens, but faithfully reappears each year to sustain the people. Mot, whose name means “death,” represents the god of “drought” and “sterility.” In the myth, he is Baal’s chief and continual antagonist. Even Baal must yield to Mot when his time (of the year) comes. When Mot comes, Baal’s time is over and he is ordered to take everything connected with him down into the depths of the earth:

> “And you, take your clouds,
> Your wind, your storm, your rains!
> With you take Padriya daughter of the stream.
> With you take Tatalliya daughter of rain.”(67:v:6-11)

The situation could hardly be more clearly described: the season of drought has come, the rain and the clouds have vanished; the streams have dried up and the vegetation languishes. But before Baal descends into the earth, however, he

> *“Makes love to a heifer in Debir,*
> *A young cow in the fields of Shimmt.*
> *He lies with her seventy-seven times—*
> *Yea, he copulates eighty-eight times—*
> *So she conceives and bears a child.”(76:v;18-22)*

Anath

The goddess of fertility. She was considered a divine prostitute. She is represented as a naked woman in the prime of life, standing on a lion, with a lily in one hand and a serpent or two in the other. Often two rams are present to portray her sexual vigor. The female organs are always accentuated.

It is important to bear in mind that these “myths” were

ritualistically enacted. Therefore we can assume that ritual bestiality was practiced by the priesthood, and temple prostitution was practiced by the adherents (priestesses) of the Anath fertility cult. Cyrus Gordan has written "that it was no crime for men to copulate with animals in Ugarit is indicated by the fact that…Baal impregnated a heifer…a myth…enacted ritually by reputable priests… Moreover, the Bible tells us that the Hebrews' pagan neighbors practiced bestiality (Lev. 18:24) as we now know to be literally true from the Ugaritic documents" (Ugaritic Literature, p. 8).

With Baal's seasonal death, his father, El, the chief god, goes into mourning. El descends from his throne and sits in sackcloth and ashes on the ground. He lacerates himself, making cuts on his face, arms chest and back (cf. I Kings 18:28):

> "Dead is Baal, the Overcomer
> Absent is the Prince, Lord (Baal) of the Earth (67:VI:9,10)
> He pours the ashes of grief on his head.
> The dust of mourning on his pate;
> For clothing, he is covered with sackcloth,
> He roams the mountain in mourning:
> He mutilates his face and beard.
> He lacerates his forearms.
> He plows his chest like a garden.
> He lacerates his back like a valley
> He lifts his voice and shouts: 'Baal is dead!'
> Woe to the people, Woe to the multitudes of Baal
> I shall go down into the earth." (67:VI:15-24)

Anath, Baal's consort, repeats this cry and copies El's self-mutilation.

How does God, the Bible, portray the Canaanites? The clearest and most comprehensive biblical assessment of the Canaanites is found in Leviticus 18:1-5:

> “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do *what is done in the land of Canaan* where I am bringing you; *you shall not walk in their statutes* (ways). You are to perform My judgments and keep my statutes, to live in accord with them. I am the Lord your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.”

By inference, everything forbidden in this chapter is simply a description of what the Canaanites were doing. First on the list of forbidden practices is incest, sexual intercourse with blood relatives and in-laws: your father and mother (v.7,8), your sister (v. 9), your daughter (v. 10), your niece (v. 11), your aunt (v.12, 13), your uncle (v.15), your sister-in-law (v.16), any woman or her children (17), polygamy (two sisters-v.18), adultery (your neighbor’s wife-v. 20), ritual child sacrifice (v.21), homosexuality, sodomy (v.22), bestiality (animals-v. 23). God summarizes these prohibitions with:

“Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have visited its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. But as for you, you are to keep My statutes and my judgments, and shall not do any of these abominations, neither the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you; for the men of the land who have been before you have done ALL these abominations, and the land has become defiled; so that the land may not spew you out should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people. Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the Lord

your God.” (Lev. 18:24-30).

God’s Purpose and Intent

What we observe above is in stark contrast to the cultic practices of the Canaanites, the high standards and expectations of conduct laid out by the God of Israel for His people. Why is it so important that the Israelites shun these practices of the indigent population, the Canaanites?

Because God is doing something new, something important. He has redeemed his chosen people from Egyptian bondage and is in the process of fulfilling his ancient promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. The larger plan involves an earlier promise (Genesis 3:15) that there would come a “Seed of the Woman” who would crush Satan and establish a means to undo the damage done in Eden through their disobedience. This plan of redemption is promised, and the remainder of the Old Testament is a working out in history the unfolding of that plan to provide a Savior, a Redeemer, a Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise.

And in Abraham God found a worthy servant who would become the patriarch, the father of a nation through whom Messiah would come, bringing untold blessing and deliverance through his life, death, and resurrection to all those who believe. Redemptive history is a long process. It began in Eden immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, and it will one day end in the New Jerusalem.

God’s peculiar people begin with Abraham and his immediate descendants: first Isaac, then Jacob, and then Joseph. These four were the founders, the patriarchs of this new people God was shaping to be the vehicle through which Messiah would come. The Israelites then spent four hundred years in bondage in Egypt until Moses was raised up to deliver them with “a strong hand.” Pharaoh finally let them go. They traveled to Mt. Sinai and stayed there a full year. They arrived at Sinai

a disorganized mob; they left there a year later an organized host. During that year God revealed to them the constitutional foundations of their heritage and their mission. He spelled out the rules of their conduct, their worship, and how they would live in community. At the end of this year, they were poised east of the Jordan and ready to go into Canaan and take it by force. But after spying out the land, the fear of the majority with respect to this campaign caused them to shrink back from their task, and God sent them into the wilderness to wander for forty years. The new generation that emerged at the close of this period of divine discipline was finally allowed to go into the Canaan and possess it.

As they prepared themselves for this task, Moses summarized for a second time (the book of Deuteronomy) just what it would take, and what they would have to do. Ironically, the issue of the Canaanites is first spoken of way back in Genesis 15! God is speaking to Abraham and He mentions the problem of the Canaanites. He first speaks of (predicts) the Egyptian bondage which would come, and then He speaks of the deliverance from Egypt, and then He promises the conquest and repossession of the Promised Land. He says:

> Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions… And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then, in the fourth generation they shall return here (Canaan) *for the iniquity of the Amorite (Canaanites) is not yet* ***complete*** (Gen. 15:12-16).

What is interesting about this is that the wickedness of the Canaanites is already recognized as a problem 400+ years before God will give the command that the Canaanites are to be slaughtered—men, women, and children! At the time the Lord spoke these words to Abraham (c. 2,000 B.C.), the Canaanites

were already corrupt, but they still had a way to go before God, who is a patient, merciful but Holy God, would finally bring judgment upon them. God gave them 400 years to "shape up," but we find them even more wicked than ever when the Israelites are about to invade (retake) their land!

What is also interesting is that when Jericho was about to be taken, Rahab the prostitute hid the two Israeli spies in her home, lied to the authorities about it, and then helped the spies escape over the wall. While the spies were in her home she said some remarkable things:

> "She came up to them on the roof and said to them, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the Amorites whom you utterly destroyed beyond the Jordan… And when we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord, your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with me…and deliver our lives from death." (Joshua 2:8-13)

Not only Rahab knew of God's powerful deliverance; she tells us that everyone else knew about these events and were fearful for their lives! The difference between Rahab and the rest of the people of Jericho is that she saw in these mysterious workings none other than the hand of the true God Himself! She repented; she believed! Because of her faith, she is mentioned in Faith's Hall of Fame (Hebrews 11:31)! My point is that other Canaanites could have responded as she did. Unfortunately, they continued on in their wicked, rebellious ways. The fullness of the "Amorites" is now complete. National judgment is at hand, with Israel as the instrument God will use to put an end to a totally depraved culture.

Why Such Excessive Slaughter? Why the Women? Why the Children?

God explains this to us in Romans 1:17-2:2:

> "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.
>
> For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
>
> Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an *image* in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to *impurity*, that their bodies might be *dishonored* among them. For they exchanged the *truth of God* for a lie, and worshipped and served the *creature* rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
>
> For this reason God *gave them over* to *degrading* passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is *unnatural*, and in the same way also the men *abandoned* the natural function of the woman and *burned in their desire* towards one another, *men with men* committing *indecent acts* and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.
>
> And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God *gave them over* to a *depraved mind*, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

> slanderers, *haters of God*, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, with out understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and though they know the ordinance of God, that *those who practice such things are* ***worthy of death***, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.
>
> Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you…and we know that the judgment of God *rightfully falls upon those who practice such things.*"

The Romans passage above describes for us in vivid detail how this can happen to a culture. And this is exactly the kind of conditions existing in Canaan as the Israelites approached to conquer the land which had been promised them. God makes it very clear to them the reasons for what they must do and how they must do it:

> "Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you… Know therefore today that *it is the Lord your God who is crossing over* before you as a *consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you,* so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the Lord has spoken to you.
>
> Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of *my* righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is because of the wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is dispossessing them before you… It is not for *your* righteousness or for the uprightness of *your* heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the *wickedness of these nations* that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order *to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

> Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn (stiff necked) people!" (Deuteronomy 9:1-6)

God makes it very clear that sometimes things deteriorate so far that a culture or a people reaches a "point of no return." The remedy is like trying to unscramble an egg. There is just no way back; things have gone too far. The story of the Genesis Flood is "Exhibit One"—a demonstration that He has already done this once on this planet. A good surgeon does not amputate a leg if someone has a severely stubbed toe. But a good surgeon will amputate if the infection is so massive that to refuse to do so would mean the loss of the whole body and person.

R.A. Torrey remarks: "It is appalling that any people should be utterly put to the sword, but it is even more appalling that a society of people should have become so corrupt and debased that such treatment is deemed necessary in the interest of humanity. The Canaanites were a moral cancer threatening the very life of the whole human race. The cancer had to be removed in order to save the body, just as a surgeon inflicts pain and suffering in order to remove a malignant growth in the body (*Difficulties in the Bible.* R.A. Torrey, p. 47).

This is exactly the dilemma God faced as the Israelites are brought back to possess their land. To settle them in the midst of these depraved people is asking for disaster. If the cancer remains, Israel will not survive. For Israel's survival, the Canaanites will have to go. Israel will be corrupted by their presence and their influence. She will fall away from the Lord Who has loved her and delivered her. Ironically, this is exactly what happened, because while they disposed of most of the inhabitants of Canaan, *they did not remove all of them.* And Israel's incomplete obedience in this matter actually brought about future, periodic relapses when

they *did* cease "following the Lord" and served other gods through the ongoing influence of these pagan tribes.

With respect to the women, the experience of Lot, his wife, and his two daughters dwelling in Sodom is instructive. We are told that if ten righteousness men could have been found in the city, God would spare it from judgment. Judgment fell on the city, indicating ten were not found. Lot was "courting disaster" to be a believer and live in such an environment. As the account indicates, Lot survived the judgment because God graciously warned him to flee the city (this was really based upon God's honoring Abraham's intercession on Lot's behalf), but his wife turned around and looked back toward Sodom. This was her home. She liked Sodom. The immorality didn't bother her. She was still yearning for Sodom when God turned her into a pillar of salt. In some instances, the women are the "prime-movers" in leading the men into sin. Torrey comments: "Though true women are nobler than true men, depraved women are more dangerous than depraved men" (p. 48).

The two daughters were also affected. They had sense enough not to turn around and look at the city, but we find in their immoral, incestuous behavior with their own father later that they were already "damaged goods." This is a good warning for Christian parents. We may choose to live in or near "Sodom" and we ourselves may survive, but it is more than likely our children will not come away unaffected by their exposure to such an unwholesome environment.

With respect to the command to dispose of the children, there is at least one bright spot, severe as it is. Those who adopt children want to do so at the earliest possible age. Why? Because evidence shows that children are early affected by whatever their family system might be. The emotional and physical abuse and wounds inflicted upon them from birth to age five or six leave permanent scars which often cannot be healed. The scars remain, and even the best of environments cannot overcome the negative influences of those early years

of development. Even these Canaanite children would have perpetuated the corrupt influence of the Canaanites among the Hebrew Community, had they been spared.

We have all observed or known of families which are so dysfunctional and corrupt we grieve for their unhappy, confused, and suffering children, and wish to God somehow they could be removed and placed in some loving, caring home where they could feel safe and not suffer at the hands of hostile and even deranged parents. Happily, there are no children in hell. Jesus loves the little children. The one bright spot in this sordid story is that God removed an entire generation of Canaanite children and took them to such a home . . . His home.

Those who struggle the most with the forceful elimination of the Canaanites in this biblical account have a very dim and truncated view of God. We have seen above that God has the right, because of His holiness and His righteousness, to visit judgment upon individuals and nations who have become corrupt and degenerate. The amazing thing is, like with the Canaanites, that He waits so long. Torrey remarks,

> "…Those who regard sin lightly and who have no adequate conception of God's holiness will always find insurmountable difficulty in this command of God, but those who have come to see the awfulness of sin and have learned to hate it with the infinite hate it deserves, and who have caught some glimpses of the infinite holiness of God and have been made in some measure partakers of that holiness, will, after mature reflection, have no difficulty whatever with this command. It is consciousness of sin in our own hearts and lives that makes us rebel against God's stern dealings with sin (p. 50)."

I hope this in some way helps to address your question, _____.

God Bless.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"Are the Ideas of the Jesus Seminar Now Catholic Doctrine?"

I am a philosophy major at Oregon State University where Marcus Borg is a professor. Many of the churches in our community ascribe to his teaching.

Here is my question…I have a dear friend that grew up in an evangelical Catholic home and knows Christ as her personal savior. She has been attending the local Catholic church here in Corvallis and recently has been strongly confronted by one of the deacons on issues surrounding the literalism of the Bible (i.e. the ideas of the Jesus Seminar, taught by Borg). The deacon has been telling her that Biblical non-literalism as Borg teaches is part of Catholic doctrine and part of the Catechism. Is this accurate? Is this indeed an international Catholic teaching or does it depend on the individual parish or person?

I would appreciate any wisdom you might have on this topic. Honestly, it's been really heated here lately, as Borg's new book has just been released. We would love it if either of you (or other speakers from Probe) could come out and do a presentation for all of the confused Christians. There is a strong evangelical movement in Corvallis, but unfortunately, it tends to be strongly anti-intellectual and isn't well

respected in the university community. As a student, I want to be able to better understand the critical issues at hand and be able to represent Christ in grace, truth, and love.

Send me whatever thoughts you have…I read article on the Jesus Seminar through Leadership University and that helped, but I really would love even more detailed information if you have any.

Thank you so much for serving as a resource for students of the Word!

Thank you for your recent e-mail concerning the Jesus Seminar. I can empathize with your "dilemma" under the shadow of Marcus Borg at your university.

I don't know if you have checked the Probe Website (www.probe.org) or not, but I would direct you to at least two essays: one that I wrote is called The Jesus Seminar, and a second was written by my colleague, Rick Wade, entitled The Historical Christ. You will find good bibliographical info for further study.

I would rather doubt that the tenets of the Jesus Seminar are now officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. I would recommend that your friend ask for official, written documentation from this priest for his assertion that this is true. I am 99% positive that no such position has been taken by the Catholic church and its biblical scholars. There is too much at stake for the church to take such a radical stand which undermines much of what they have held to be true about Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to come and debate Borg, I would suggest that you contact my good friend Dr. J. P. Moreland and/or Michael J. Wilkins at Talbot Seminary in southern California. They edited a book entitled *Jesus Under Fire* which was published by Zondervan in 1995. Each chapter is written by a evangelical scholar, each of which develops and

refutes the major arguments of the Jesus Seminar position.

I have been studying this topic for several years, and following the literature, but these men, as New Testament Scholars, are current on this issue and have devoted the kind of study and depth necessary to give good account of themselves with a fine scholar like Borg.

I can appreciate your frustration with the general Christian community. Most are not “armed” for the battle of ideas which we face. That is why I left Campus Crusade in 1973 and began Probe Ministries. At the time I gave oversight to the Campuses in the Southwest U.S. The worldview America has come to embrace generally now once existed only on a few campuses: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, U. of Wisconsin (Madison), Columbia U., and U. of Colorado.

I found myself hard pressed to respond to the questions of these students. So I decided the Lord was calling upon me not to “curse the darkness”, but rather “light some lamps!” The early Christians, it is said, were effective because they OUT-THOUGHT and OUT-LOVED the ancient world! In fact, for 250 years after the apostles died off, the church did nothing but try to survive and answer/refute/respond to all the doctrinal challenges which came from the Jewish and Pagan communities without, and from sects and heresies within. They were so busy doing this, that it was not until 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea) that the addressed/clarified the doctrine of the Trinity! The FIRST theology of the early church was APOLOGETICAL theology, and we find ourselves facing the same kind of circumstances and challenges today.

So you hang in there! And tell your friend to do the same. Challenge the priest and don’t be bullied by him. If it IS an official position, tell her that I requested that it be documented so I will be able to confirm to others who ask that this is truly official. If I were a betting man (and I am ::::SMILE!::::), your friend will find that no such

affirmation of this policy will be forthcoming.

With Warm Regards in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"What Is the 'Sin Unto Death'?" [Jimmy Williams]

I have always been puzzled with 1 John 5:16-17 and the meaning of the "sin unto death." Can you explain exactly what John is referring to?

> *16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.*
> *17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.*

I would really appreciate any help you can give me on this.

Thank you for your e-mail and your concerns about "the sin unto death" mentioned in 1 John 5:16-17.

Let me see if I can give you an acceptable answer to your question. In doing so, we will first have to explore a number of factors which come from the Bible. Let me begin with a passage from Hebrews 12:

> *"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. . . Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He*

> *receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet. . ." (Heb. 12:5-13).*

Whether we are reading the Old Testament or the New, we find that God is at work to create a family for His own pleasure, a company of sons and daughters who will commune with and look to Him for love, provision, guidance, and consolation. In the Gospel of John, chapters 1 and 3 make it clear that when we place our faith in Jesus Christ to be our Savior Who, through His death, can make us presentable to God, we join the family of God through a new spiritual birth and thus embark upon our personal Christian pilgrimage which ends on the day we die.

As newborns in this family, we are admonished by the Word to "Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18), and "as newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may *grow* in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2).

All children, physical and spiritual, undergo a process of development which involves time. The theological term for this process is "sanctification," which means the **Christian life.** Along the way, as we saw above in the Hebrews passage, we observe that God, like any good father, disciplines us appropriately when necessary. The goal is *training*, not *punishment*. This training process may occur through circumstances we encounter, and which God allows, or it can come through knowledge of the Bible:

> *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in*

> *righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).*

We have a vivid example of this process in the Apostle Paul's life. He describes it this way:

> *"And because of the surpassing abundance of (my) revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself…. Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:7-9).*

We don't have a clear picture what this "thorn" was. Most believe it was a physical ailment. There is some indication that it may have been an eye problem. But the point I make here is that God may allow all kinds of circumstances into our life which are designed for training purposes. This process is *the normal Christian Life.*

Another good example comes from 1 Corinthians 11:21-31. Paul writes this epistle to address several problems and/or abuses occurring among the church members there. One abuse was that when the believers came together to take communion, some of the members showed up to enjoy the food and some came *drunk!* Paul rebukes them saying, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry, and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. . . For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep."

This passage makes it clear to us that there are consequences to our disobedience. Some of these Corinthian believers evidently are disciplined by God through both illness and even death ("some of you sleep"). That is *not* to say that all illness and death are divine judgments, but some *are.*

In this particular instance, some of the disobedient Corinthians experienced the "sin unto death." (That is, some of them died).

With this background, we come to the heart of your question. The "sin unto death" is found throughout the Bible and seems to be connected to new eras of biblical history.

Here are some examples where people experienced death through disobedience:

- *Giving of the Law, Mount Sinai: Golden Calf (Exodus 32)*
- *Institution of Levitical Priesthood: "Strange Fire" (Leviticus 10)*
- *Conquest of the Land: Achan (Joshua 7)*
- *Beginning of the Church: Ananias & Sapphira (Acts 5)*
  (See also Samson and Saul—God was longsuffering with both)

Speaking of the incident in Leviticus 10 where Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered "strange fire" which "consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev. 10:2), Rev. Ray Stedman of Palo Alto Bible Church says:

> *This was a sin of presumption, not a sin of ignorance. They knew better and what incense they were supposed to burn. . . they had been told emphatically that God would be offended if they offered incense other than that which he had prescribed.* Second, it was a sin dealt with severely because it distorted God's revelation of Himself. All of these sacrifices and rituals were intended for us to learn what*

> *kind of God He is. Third, God used it to set an example. God is here teaching a lesson-to show how important it was for the priests at the beginning of their priesthood to follow explicitly what God commanded. And it only happened once. Similarly, though the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (deception, hypocrisy) was common among Christians of the early church and common ever since, God never visited death like that again. It is a manifestation of God's love and concern. At the outset, He is wanting to stop this kind of thing from happening again, and He is giving fair warning of the eventual consequences to anyone presumptuous enough to sin deliberately in this way." That is the way we human beings work. Unless an issue is vividly, dramatically, openly, symbolically made clear to us, we'll go right on and do the wrong thing. So God is stopping that, arresting it with his judgment at this point. But he really wants us to learn to refrain for the sake of his glory, not out of fear for our lives. *(Cf. elaborate instructions on incense, Exodus 30:34-38, particularly v. 38).*

Sin Unto Death (1 John 5)

Now let's look at the passage you have questioned. The first thing to note is the *context*. This major topic from 5:13-18 is prayer. We are given in verses 13-15 that God hears and responds to our prayers. The key word is "*anything*." Then John remembers there ***is*** an exception: praying for a disobedient, sinning brother or sister in Christ. What to do? How do we pray for that one? Here is the sequence we must keep in mind for such a one as we pray.

First of all, the Apostle John tells us that there is a sin **not** leading to death (physical). In verse 16, he tells us that it is possible for Christians to fall into this sin not leading to death. [See also 1 John 2:1,2—the ideal is to "sin not." But if anyone sins (*and we will*), we have an Advocate, a defense attorney.]

When Christians observe disobedience in brothers and sisters, they *are* to pray for him/her (16b); as a result of these prayers, God may choose to preserve, prolong, extend the person's physical life (not eternal life, since that life is determined by one's personal faith decision).

This intercession is effective only in the case of sin **not** leading to death (16c): that is, the person has not reached the end limits of God's patience and grace (His "last straw"). See also v. 17 where John says, "All unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin which is not unto (physical) death."

Secondly, there **is** a sin which results in physical death—the sin unto death (v. 16d): This is the death of a believer characterized by persistent, willful sinning in which "the flesh is destroyed [physical death—1 Cor. 5:1-5] so that the *spirit* might be saved."

John tells us that this is a sin ***not*** to be prayed for, because God's immutable law concerning this final, "last straw" disobedience is involved and will be unaltered by intercessory prayer (16e), and frankly, we do not know another's heart condition before the Lord. We are not encouraged to speculate about the cause of any believer's untimely death. In our prayer life, we can continue to intercede for a wayward brother or sister, but we are not to draw any conclusions about what may, should, or has happened in regard to a believer's death.

Thirdly, when some Christian we know dies, we might be inclined to ask the question of ourselves, "Was this the sin unto death or not?" John is telling us in this passage not to speculate, because we just don't know.

All through this Epistle (1 John) the Apostle has been addressing sin in the life of the believer—yours and every Christian you know. It is fitting that John portrays the remedy of *habitual* sin on the part of a believer in the

context of the new birth. The "black and white" contrast all through 1 John concludes with the same idea, and one that is also expressed in the book of James:

> *"Even so, faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself. But someone may say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' . . Are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:17,18, 20, 26)*

The New Testament clearly teaches that "Faith alone saves (Ephesians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5), but saving faith is never alone."

This leads us to a practical application in observing/evaluating another believer's life and imperfections. This verse comes to mind: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with *our* spirit that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16). What we learn from this verse is that we can know about *ourselves*, (i.e. that *we* have the Spirit, that *we* are born again), but ultimately we cannot know about *another*. In other words, I can know about *me,* but I can't know about *you.* You can know about *you,* but you can't know about *me.*

Practically speaking then, we should accept every person's testimony who claims to be a Christian. Actual Christian behavior is on a spectrum which John describes by saying, "all sin [big and little] is unrighteousness." Only God can rightly see the totality of a believer's obedience and disobedience over a lifetime, and rightly judge it. As a loving Father, He may bring discipline to get us "back on track." 1 John 1 and 2 speak to the way this may be accomplished—God's grace through the Blood of Christ providing daily cleansing through confession/acknowledgement (1 John 1:9) and thus, further potential opportunity to serve.

Since we cannot see the heart of another, we can only inspect the "fruit" (or lack thereof) we see in a life. The farther a believer appears to wander away from God, the more "bad fruit" we observe, and the more we wonder about the truthfulness of that believer's profession of faith. We cannot help being tempted to ask the question: "Is this person *really* a Christian?" We are to go no farther in our evaluation or conclusion; rather, we should *continue our intercession* for him or her.

> *John 21: 20-22: "And looking around, Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus loved (John the Apostle) following them. . .and therefore seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? **You** follow me!" (Old Aramaic Expression: "Stick to your knitting!" <smile>).*

I hope this answers your question, _____.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"Was Reincarnation Ever in the Bible?"

I have a question about reincarnation. My father recently read this book called *Many Lives, Many Masters* by Dr. Brian Weiss. It is about a psychiatrist who explored the past lives of one of his patients through hypnotic regression.

In the third chapter he claims that reincarnation was in the

Bible but was later removed. I quote from the book:

> **"There were indeed references to reincarnation in the Old and New Testaments. In A.D. 325 the Roman emperor Constantine the Great, along with his mother, Helena, had deleted references to reincarnation contained in the New Testament. The Second Council of Constantinople meeting in A.D. 553, confirmed this action and declared the concept of reincarnation a heresy." (p. 35-36)**

Is this true?

I would like to answer two issues in your e-mail. The first is about past-lives regression through hypnosis. Our friends at the Watchman Fellowship have a MOST interesting article by their director, James Walker, called "The Day I Hypnotized a Reincarnated Prospector." The point was to demonstrate to a Dallas Seminary class the powerfully deceptive nature of the cults and the occult. I highly recommend this article: www.watchman.org/na/chair10.htm

Secondly, concerning your question about reincarnation being excised from the Bible. Similar to what your father found in the book he read, a section of Shirley MacLaine's book *Out on a Limb* records these comments from her New Age mentor, David:

> "The theory of reincarnation is recorded in the Bible. But the proper interpretations were struck from it during an Ecumenical Council meeting of the Catholic Church in Constantinople sometime around 553 A.D, called the Council of Nicea. The Council members voted to strike those teachings from the Bible in order to solidify Church control." [New York: Bantam Books, 1983, pp. 234-5.]

Dr. Paul R. Eddy, Associate Professor of Theology at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, responds:

> "In response to this claim, we must begin by pointing out a few basic historical inaccuracies. First, The Council of

Nicea, the first of the seven Ecumenical councils, took place in 325 A.D. It was concerned with the teachings of Arius and their implications for a correct understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. The documents from this Council offer no evidence that the topic of reincarnation ever came up for discussion, let alone that it was condemned and removed from the Bible. No doubt this claim means to refer, rather, to the fifth Ecumenical Council, held in 553—the Council of Constantinople. The primary purpose of this Council was to ease the tensions in the Church caused by the Council of Chalcedon 100 years previous. Again, there is no evidence whatsoever that the idea of reincarnation was ever discussed, let alone condemned and purged from the Bible. What the reincarnationists are probably referring to here is the condemnation of Origenism, which included belief in the pre-existence of the soul. This should not, however, be confused with the notions of the karmic cycle of reincarnation. This is clear from Origen's own words on this matter when he writes of "the dogma of transmigration, which is foreign to the Church of God not handed down by the Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures." Other early theologians, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Gregory of Nyssa, also explicitly rejected the idea of reincarnation. Another problem with this theory is the fact that manuscripts of the Bible exist dating back to the third century. For example, the Bodmer Papyri (dated around 200-225), the Chester Beatty Papyri (dated around 200-250), Codex Vaticanus (dated around 325-350), and Codex Sinaiticus (dated around 340) are all documents written centuries prior to the 533 Council, and none of them reveal any supposed reincarnationist teachings that were removed from later editions of the Bible! Beyond this, it is known that the core canon of the Bible was essentially recognized and acknowledged throughout the orthodox Church as early as the late second and early third centuries, as evidenced by the list contained in the Muratorian Fragment (dated around 170). All of this points towards the impossibility of a

> conspiratorial purgation of the doctrine of reincarnation—or any other doctrine for that matter—from the Bible during any of the Ecumenical Councils." [ittsy.com/focusonthefaulty.com/reincarnation-and-the-bible/]

I hope you can see that the burden of proof is on the reincarnationists to show us those supposed Biblical passages supporting reincarnation! The idea that the original versions of the Bible containing teachings on reincarnation were all confiscated and burned—another fantasy floating around these days—is merely that, a fantasy. There is no evidence for any myth of reincarnation taught in the Bible, either past or present. Hebrews 9:27 nails that coffin shut: "It is appointed unto man to die once, and after that comes judgment."

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin

"Why Did God Allow Animals to be Eaten and Sacrificed?"

Why did God allow animals to be sacrificed and to eat other animals if He loves His creation? They are innocent. (I am not an animal rights activist. I am a Christian.)

I think the answer must first be addressed in the reality with which we find ourselves. The cosmos according to Christians was created by God. In the early chapters of Genesis we find that everything God created is expressed over and over as being something GOOD.

The Cosmos is made up of minerals, plants, animals, and

humans, the lower to the higher. We are told that only man was created in God's image. That does not mean the rest of creation is of NO value, but there is a hierarchy involved. We are told that all of the created order was intended for man. And that he was to have dominion over it. This does not mean the exploitation of everything for selfish purposes. But God provided a food chain involving plants and animals for man.

We see in the Hindu culture a good example of what happens to a culture when the food chain is distorted. Hindus, with their doctrine of reincarnation, believe that animals are just as valuable as human beings, and some, in a former life, may have actually been human beings. Therefore, all devout Hindus are vegetarians.

What makes this difficult is that now scientists are moving toward the position that even PLANTS have consciousness! Does God love the flora any less than the fauna He created? That leaves us with a diet for our existence totally dependent upon rocks!

Man was never intended to "rape the resources." Having "dominion" meant for man to be good stewards of the plant and animal world. "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," says the psalmist. (Ps. 24:1) We don't own the earth; we are to be good stewards of it.

The scriptures are filled with indications of God's love for that which He created. Jesus notices the beautiful lilies of the field. Men are not to abuse their animals, but rather care for them with kindness, not with harshness. He takes notice of every sparrow who falls to the ground in death. God explicitly states that one purpose of plants and animals was to provide food for man. He even gave some instructions about *which* animals we were to eat and which we should not.

Consider this verse: Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and

yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not *worth much more than they?* (Matt. 6:27). Jesus goes on to say, "Do not be anxious saying, 'What shall we eat? Or what shall we drink?'…for…your heavenly Father *knows* that you have *need* for all these things." (Matt. 6:31-32).

Your question springs out of a matrix of thought which is very popular in the modern world. . .that all life is sacred (I agree). But the further notion held forth today is that the life of a dolphin or a sea otter or a spotted owl is equal in value to a human being.

The Bible does not teach this equality. Jesus didn't teach it, as we see above. All life is sacred because it came from the hand of God. But it is not all equal in value. Man is set apart as the recipient for which it was intended.

Those who would remove this distinction do not elevate man. If there is nothing special about man (which appears to be true in so many ways), then man is dragged down to the status of beast or animal, and an "open season" on man to cure overpopulation problems would make as much sense as an open season on whitetail deer each fall here in Texas to thin out the one half million which inhabit this state. My point here is that once you remove this line, man is not special in any sense and there is no reason we shouldn't live like the rest of the animals on the planet: "survival of the fittest." Hitler understood this. . .and practiced it!

I don't think you would agree that this is a solution to the problem.

Does this help any?

Sincerely,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

“There is No Satan, No Hell, and No People Born Bad”

I believe after 25,000 hrs of study and research, that WE should teach more about Creation and nature, along with philosophy and science, at a early age.

Western man starts his voyage of life thinking, he/she is bad, a sinner and always going to hell with Satan. There is NO Satan. There is no hell. These are for all serious realists a level of evil conciousness. Our children are not born into a world of sin. No more than a new born fawn, calf, bird etc. etc. We all have the knowledge of knowing right from wrong. In the Eastern cultures, primarily the Buddhist, teach their young that they are good boys/girls.

The orthodox churches take hold of one’s spirit and give it fright and scare. The conformist and orthodoxy are nothing more than a industrialized money making venture. Now our new president wants to give our tax dollars to the same groups.

Somewhere, somehow America must change. This earth will probably be here for a very long time. When we think on terms of eternity, infinity and the finite, let us teach the truth about nature and clean up this planet, and the young minds. We continue to tell our youth of how bad they are, they believe this. No, this gives them the license to murder, child molest, rape and a total criminal behavior. What would one expect, but our terrible bad society. Every generation this grows worse.

I’m not sure why you sent us this recent message except perhaps as a mild rebuke of our Christian Theistic worldview. Let me just point out that setting yourself up as an authority by stating the number of hours you have studied this subject

and simply stating your position as categorically true with no attempt at argument or persuasion conforms to the standard practice of propaganda and not rational discourse.

If you want to challenge something specific on our site, please write us stating what you disagree with and why and we will respond as best we can. I’m afraid your e-mail as it stands accomplishes little more than an opportunity for you to state your opinions to no one in particular. Therefore, there is no reason to specifically respond to any of your speculations.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin, Ph.D.
Probe Ministries