On Black Holes and Archangels

Dr.Terlizzese too often hears from Christian leaders and laymen that film, philosophy, literature, music, mythology, etc. (arts and humanities), are polluted wells that Christians do better to avoid rather than risk contamination. Yet no such warning is ever given about science and technology, always readily accepted under the rubric of natural revelation, except for some strange birds like Jacques Ellul or Neal Postman. "On Black Holes and Archangels" attempts to bridge this hypocritical divide in knowledge through raising art to the status of science as a legitimate source of knowledge concerning God and the human condition. As professor Lewis Sperry Chafer once wrote, theology uses "any and every source."

Reversal of Theological Priorities

When theology students talk about general revelation they mean science. God shows himself through the natural world; the movement of the stars, the rhythms of biology, the complexity of chemical synthesis, the beauty of the Grand Canyon and the like. Invariably, they almost always neglect human nature as a prominent theological source in acute reversal of theological priorities.

Comparatively, the bible says very little about the nature of the cosmos and the animal kingdom; instead it focuses on Adam's Race (humanity), Adam's prominence as divine vice-regent, his fall from innocence, the pain and suffering ensuing from a ruptured relationship with the Maker; the creation of the Hebrew people and the sacrificial offering of his Son (the Second Adam [Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:45]) in the plan of redemption.

The Bible is mostly about Israel's reluctance to serve God. Their obstinate disobedience, their refusal to recognize absolute righteousness of the One God, the pleading of the prophets to return to the Truth; their judgment and horrifying dissolution, but final salvation thanks only to the divine mercy of their heavenly Father, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). Israel serves as paradigm for all people, as the new creation of humanity in the Second Adam that brings the renewal of God's creation, the natural world; "A shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse . . . the lion shall lay down with the lamb . . . they will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-9; 27:6).

The theological reversal of priorities places science and reason over religion and faith, which interprets human nature in light of the cosmos rather than the cosmos in light of human nature and salvific transformation; as Adam goes so goes nature; "Cursed is the ground because of you [Adam];" "the creation will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Genesis 3:17;
Romans 8:19-22).

This reversal is reminiscent of C. P. Snow's critical paradigm called the *Two Cultures*.{1} Snow elucidated the theory that modern epistemology splits between science and the humanities, or said simply, between religion and science, between subjective and objective knowledge, creating an imbalance that favors one way of knowing over the other. Any juxtaposition in knowledge will result in the denigration of religion or science that fails to recognize their inherent compatibility.

Evangelicals are quick to latch onto the split in knowledge, recognizing science's superiority as source of knowledge and engine for technological acceleration in a theological reversal of priorities that recognizes all things scientific and technological as gifts from God, even offering

metaphysical justification for technological acceleration under the theological rubric of general revelation, yet disparaging the humanities as a polluted well. However, science is not general revelation, it is only the philosophical lens used to interpret it—which is not incorrect, just incomplete. A consistent application of general revelation must include the humanities as a valid source of knowledge on human nature as equal to science: philosophy, religion, literature, art, film, etc., all present a valid interpretation of human nature that serves as sources for theology. L. Sperry Chafer's argued decades ago that theology uses "any and every source."{2}

What is General Revelation?

Most evangelical theology divides revelation or God's self-disclosure into two categories called general revelation and special revelation, a division of knowledge going back at least to Saint Thomas Aquinas, receiving its greatest expression in the early modern period with the theory of the *Two Books* by Francis Bacon. The first book of the knowledge of God comes from the natural world, discerned and interpreted by reason, open to all—hence general knowledge; modern science and philosophy grounded in rationalism develops from this theological base. The second book of knowledge of God was considered Holy Scripture, discerned and interpreted through faith supported by reason—hence it is not open to all, only the faithful.

General revelation refers to the knowledge of God outside of the Bible in nature, history, and personal experience; it is open to all people and anyone can understand it. Special revelation refers to the knowledge of God revealed in the Bible alone, such as the dual nature of Christ as the God/Man, the Trinity, the story of redemption and the knowledge of salvation. It is special because only those who accept the word of God by faith know these truths discerned by the Spirit

of God (1 Corinthians 2). The two forms of revelation always complement each other. However, special revelation has greater authority than general revelation as the exclusive source for knowledge of salvation. We are saved through special revelation and never through general revelation which largely teaches humanity's need for God, but offers no solution because that will only be found in special revelation.

God's presence is revealed in nature but in a very limited way. Humanity actually knows very little about God from general revelation. People talk about "the love of God" but that is not a concept drawn from the natural world. The poet Tennyson said "nature is red in tooth and claw," meaning nature is cruel and unforgiving. The reality of nature as hostile and uncaring does not reflect the character of God. We know God is love, only because the Bible, not nature, tells us He is love (John 3:16; 1 John). Seeing a grizzly bear mother eating her young on a nature documentary convinced me of the truth of Tennyson's statement.

General revelation means God reveals himself through the humanities as well as the sciences. The opening of the evangelical mind begins with a view of revelation that takes the arts and humanities as seriously as the sciences as a valid source of knowledge.

On Black Holes and Archangels

As the astronomer sees and reflects the divine glory of the cosmos, so the philosopher, musician, novelist and film artist reflects the inner light of soul—as complicated, profound and stunning as the swirl of galaxies, as explosive as a supernova and as deep and forbidding as a black hole! Artists explore remote and inhospitable depths of inner space. They transport the human spirit to destinies Magellan, Columbus and Verrazano never dreamt of; where Voyager will never encounter, where the telescope sees blindly . . . where angels fear to tread!

Art explores inner recesses of human nature and delivers subjective knowledge on topics such as anxiety, alienation, despair, boredom, hate, faith, love, fear, courage, lust, oppression and liberation, not quantifiable or objective, but just as real and valuable to Christian theology as the scientist's observations. Theologian of Culture Paul Tillich insightfully argued that art was the spiritual barometer of culture: "Art is religion."{3} In order to understand culture and the ultimate questions it asks in relating the Gospel message, the theologian must turn to philosophy, literature, paintings, music, etc.

Science and art are not in competition. Just as reason and faith complement each other as sources of knowledge, so subjective and objective knowledge act as two halves of the same coin—the union of the left and right sides of the brain. "Historian of Evil" Jeffrey Burton Russell writes,

> *This question of how we know seems unfamiliar because we have been brought up to imagine that something is either "real" or "not real," as if there were only one valid world view, only one way to look at things, only one approach to truth. Given the overwhelming prestige of natural science during the past century, we usually go on to assume that the only approach to truth is through natural science . . . it seems to be "common sense" . . . there are multiple truth systems, multiple approaches to reality. Science is one such approach. But . . . science is . . . a construct of the human mind . . . based on undemonstrable assumptions of faith. There is no scientific proof of the bases of science. [There is] no real difference between the subject and objective approach to things . . . science has its limits, and beyond those limits there are, like other galaxies, other truth systems. These other systems are not without resemblances to science, but their modes of thought are quite different: among them are history, myth, poetry, theology, art, and analytical psychology. Other truth systems have existed in the past;*

> *still more may exist in future; we can only guess what thought structures exist among other intelligent beings.{4}*

Only novelists, film makers, poets and theologians can communicate the possible thought structures of angels, demons or ETI's. How does the thought process of an archangel differ from that of seraphim and cherubim? The *Star Trek* franchise may be our best introduction to alien civilizations in the absence of any hard evidence.

Elysium: The Acceleration of the Status Quo into Outer Space

The recent (2013) science fiction movie *Elysium* depicts the human condition as it has existed throughout human history and extends it to the space station Elysium. In the year 2154, the class difference between the haves and the have not's appears in bold relief. Elysium is a haven for the wealthy and technologically powerful elite who rule the sub-proletariat peoples of earth living in squalor, misery and deprivation. Los Angeles is reminiscent of the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo today. The few control the many through the accumulation and withholding of wealth and technological power, especially medical machines "Med-Bays" that reverse cell damage and heals all sickness and disease, granting virtual immortality. A self-appointed champion of the people Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) with nothing left to lose—since his exposure to a fatal radiation dose has left him with five days to live—mounts an assault on Elysium and accomplishes the impossible, a revolution that gains control of the space station's computer system and the robot guardians, turning them against the establishment and bringing relief to the people of Earth.

Elysium serves as a great cinematic example of liberation theology and window into the human condition that never changes despite technological acceleration that empowers the

few to control the many. In any late stage of civilization, from Egypt and Rome to modernity, the same conditions prevail: the elite rule the many and technology makes no difference in alleviating social inequalities. Technological advance, as the movie portrays, only accelerates the status quo so that the struggle for freedom and equality of all people simply takes place off the earth on a space station.

The Enlightenment idea of progress envisions a global advance of humanity across all social lines. Any concentration of power and wealth in an elite group to the neglect of the rest of the planet, regardless of how technologically advanced or socially integrated, is not progress but regress. *Elysium* reflects contemporary global conditions—the status quo, the way things actually are, projecting them one generation or forty years into the future.

When technological acceleration grants the world equal social conditions, such as the elimination of poverty, hunger and disease in Africa and Latin America as in the Western world, or the ready accessibility of health care in the United States as in the Netherlands or Canada, then we do justice to the noble word "*Progress*." In the absence of social equality, technological growth renders the same absolute social imbalances and universal disillusionment in the modern world as existed in the late Roman Empire, the concentration of power in an elite, ruling ruthlessly over the masses without hope of change, except on a global scale that moves rapidly towards dissolution, where robot guardians replace the Praetorian Guard.{5}

"Nein! Nein! Nein!"

There is no saving knowledge of God in history, science, economics, philosophy, math or whatever. NO! NO! NO! I am in complete agreement with Karl Barth on this point: "Nein! Nein! Nein!" No! Absolutely not! Never! The saving knowledge of Christ comes only through the word of God and centers on the

work of Jesus Christ for all mankind. The knowledge of God in general revelation is not saving knowledge of the Gospel. If one could know God through the means of general revelation then it would make special revelation and the coming of Christ superfluous and useless. General revelation only condemns and functions for Gentiles like the Law of Moses for Jews (Romans 1:18-32; Galatians 3).

General revelation prepares humanity for special revelation. Knowledge of God and the human condition in general revelation creates the need for special revelation. General revelation shows humanity its sinfulness and need for a savior; "How majestic is Your name in all the earth. Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens . . . What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:1-4). Job gave the only possible answer as a finite being when reminded of wonders of God's creation: "I know You can do all things . . . I declared that which I did not understand . . . I retract and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6). "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). General revelation demonstrates God's absence from humanity; it reveals the "UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23).

Special revelation meets that need for reconciliation with God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation cannot come from any other avenue than special revelation, a major theological premise the great theologian Karl Barth staunchly defended. According to Barth, all revelation is special revelation and all revelation imparts the saving knowledge of Christ.

General revelation brings the knowledge of God's absence, consciousness of alienation from the divine, much as the Mosaic Law brings the awareness of sin (Romans 1-3); but only to set us up for the knowledge of the Savior that comes from hearing the gospel of Christ preached (Romans 4-10). "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).{6}

Notes

1. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

2. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. One* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 5. Chafer defined systematic theology as "A science which follows a humanly devised scheme or order of doctrinal development and which purports to incorporate into its system all truth about God and His universe from any and every source."

3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7.

4. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 18, 19.

5. Carroll Quigley, *The Evolution of Civilizations: An Introduction to Historical Analysis* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979); Roderick Seidenberg, *Posthistoric Man: An Inquiry* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1950); Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1987, 1949); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR; Cascade, 2005).

6. Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace* by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply *No!* by Dr. Karl Barth (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002, Reprint).

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Law and Grace: Combating the American Heresy of Pelagianism

The American Church has fallen under the error of Pelagianism. *Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.*

"For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." (John 1: 17, NASB)

A young college student once told me that a pastor's son argued with him that no religion—and especially not Christianity—was about faith in any God, but rather the good works that we do for others. Christianity, so the preacher's boy said, concerned doing to others what we would have done to us; it does not even matter if God exists or not, only the good we do for people counts—philanthropy, morality and being a good person matters most, not faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

What the young theologian argued was that all religions are basically the same. They are moralistic[1], which means they inspire people to do good works and that any metaphysical aspect, such as who God is or what he may have done for humanity is irrelevant. Similarly, we often hear that people choose to do evil and that they are not born that way, it is the environment that makes us corrupt—that we are not corrupt by nature.

This all sounds like common sense, but amounts to a denial of the central Christian belief in salvation by grace through faith alone. If we are not sinners by nature but only by choice than we can conceivably make more good choices than evil ones in order to redeem ourselves and then there would be

no need for faith or a savior. Good works and keeping either the internal law of conscience or the old Mosaic Law would suffice.

Salvation by Grace Through Faith Alone

Salvation by grace through faith provides the great distinctive of the Christian faith compared to the other world religions. In contrast, the monotheistic religions Islam and Judaism both present a path of works salvation through obeying either the Torah or the Qur'an. The pantheistic religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, believe in a rigorous path of enlightenment. While they subscribe to a unique theological heritage and may even be saved, many within the Christian sphere tend to under–appreciate and even unintentionally deny God's free and eternal gift of salvation through a well–meaning but misdirected emphasis on the Mosaic Code, also called the Law (or the Ten Commandments) or other moral and legal codes that operate in a similar fashion, as measuring sticks for salvation.

Christians continually misunderstand and misuse the Law, thus placing themselves and others in bondage to a *de facto* works salvation mentality. The Apostle Paul argued that we did not begin with the Spirit in our salvation only to be perfected by "the flesh" in the works of the Law (Galatians 3: 3). Paul repeatedly identified legalism as a work of the flesh or sinful human nature and worldliness. He spoke of "the elemental principles of the world" (Galatians. 4: 3 and Col. 2: 8, 20) not as secularism, or so called "worldly" practices such as dancing, smoking or movie attendance, as Christians do today. Rather, worldliness according to these passages was the religiosity of the Judaizing heresy that imposed legal restrictions on believers such as circumcision (as seen in *Galatians*) or dietary restrictions, festivals and Sabbath observance or angel worship (in *Colossians*). Paul rejected his great religious inheritance, status and fame as a Pharisee,

considering it all a work of the flesh, so that his righteousness would not derive from the Law, but from Christ (Philippians 3: 1–9). Religious legalism represents as great a threat to grace in the New Testament than any libertine license for sin.

Works salvation indicates a profound insecurity concerning individual freedom in the world's religions and a desire to impose an authoritarian structure. Christians are not guiltless either, as they harbor the same tendencies to impose the Mosaic Code or some form of it on Christians and non–Christians alike. For example, Torah Observant Christians, *Reconstructionism*, *Theonomy*, and *Covenant Theology* all hold to a continuity between law and grace that brings Christians back under the legal and moral requirements of the Mosaic Code. The persistence of Christians who want to commit themselves to the Law, even after 2000 years of Christian history, indicates the Church's misunderstanding of the role of the Law after Christ and the Church's uneasiness with its own belief in grace.

The Role of the Law Today: Instructive, *not* Operative

Preachers and theologians are known to say "We are still under the 10 Commandments" or "The moral law is still in effect, but the rest has been fulfilled by Christ." Although, these explanations offer some guidance on what to do with the 800 pound gorilla in the room– with the theology of grace–they ultimately cannot avoid inconsistencies either with the Law or with the New Testament principle of grace, God's unconditional love.

The Mosaic Law was given to Israel on Mount Sinai as their Constitution and guide to holiness; it was never capable of bringing eternal salvation, but served as a teacher to the preservation of Israel in the Promised Land while demonstrating God's righteous character. It was a temporary

operating system, so to speak, that was necessary in order to display human sinfulness and point to humanity's need for grace. But, crucially, it was destined to pass away or be retired once the plan of God came to fruition in the Life of Christ (Galatians 3). It showed only humanity's guilt, yet foreshadowed in its practices the promise of God's ultimate work of grace (Hebrews 8: 5; 10: 1). Once grace arrived in the work of Christ, the Law was no longer necessary (Hebrews 8: 6). The Law only pointed to human need for grace or the presence of sin. The Law shows people their unrighteousness. God demonstrates his mercy only after explaining and portraying his righteousness. God gives the Law first to demonstrate sin and *then* sends his Son to reveal His love and grace.

The Mosaic Law functions similarly to natural law or general revelation in demonstrating humanity's need for God, the absence of God from the human heart (Romans 1 & 2). The Law and general revelation both perform a preparatory role: either telling humanity it does not know God, as with general revelation, or revealing humanity's sin, as with the Law (Romans 3). They give no saving knowledge, but function only to condemn and never to save. Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.

One Law, Indivisible, With Grace for All

There is only one Law, which must be accepted as a whole. The unity of the Law applies equally to either its total fulfillment in Christ or to the possibility that the Law remains operative after Christ. The Law cannot be subdivided into different sections such as moral, ceremonial and civil that were applicable before Christ and those sections still applicable after Christ. Any theological approach to the Law that states its partial effectiveness misunderstands the unity of the Law and the work of Christ that has already fulfilled

the Law in its entirety. One either keeps the whole Law or does not (Galatians 3: 10; James 2: 10; Matthew 5: 19; Deuteronomy 27: 1; 28: 1; 30: 8). Likewise, either Christ fulfilled the Law or he did not. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say the Law was partially fulfilled in Christ, leaving the Church to fulfill the rest. A change in one aspect of the Law, such as the Old Testament Priesthood, necessitates the inauguration of a new law and not merely a partial change in the old law (Hebrews 7: 12). Paul argued against the *Judaizers*, who imposed legal restrictions on Christians, that if they accepted one part of the Law they were "under obligation to keep the whole Law" (Galatians 5: 3).

Any return to the Law rejects faith in Christ and even creates a hindrance to the progression of the plan of God in history. The Book of Hebrews gives a dire warning to all who return to these former elements: "For if we go on sinning willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment.… Anyone who set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has insulted the spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10: 26–29).

Does Retirement of the Law Mean God Changed?

The problem many express with notion of the Law's retirement is based on this conclusion: God cannot change, so how can He, in effect, repeal his own law? The Law was given in order to maintain Israel as a separate people who would act as a conduit through whom God would send his Messiah to reach the whole world. "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (Galatians 4:

4). *The Law was by its very nature temporary and conditional to Israel as an operative system in the history of God's plan of universal redemption.* Once the Law and Israel achieved their purposes, or were "fulfilled" in Christ they became obsolete (Hebrews 8: 13). The Law had an expiration date, a shelf life that only lasted until Messiah arrived. The Law played a preparatory role for the coming of Christ; it never had the power to save, but only to condemn in identifying and demonstrating human sin and inadequacies. Its function was to ready mankind for salvation. The Law is good and holy, but it is also obsolete and incomplete (Romans 7; Galatians 3).

Good News! The Law is Fulfilled in Christ

The Law was not abolished, repealed or revamped in any way in the new age of grace. Jesus himself says that he did not come to destroy [*katalyō*] or subvert the Law, but to fulfill [*plēroō*] it (Matthew 5: 17), which means to complete, to finish, accomplish or expire. Paul repeats Jesus' declaration by stating that "Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law," meaning he is the termination or conclusion of it (Romans 10: 4). Jesus does not change the Law nor add to it which he himself admonishes against (Matthew 5: 17–19). The Law was fulfilled in Christ, meaning he met all of its requirements and standards as well as the subsequent punishments for failure. He lived the Law for humanity, keeping it perfectly as our representative before God, and died for all of us, meeting its requisite punishment for sin. Jesus' last words on the cross "It is finished [*teleō*]" (John 19: 30), marks the completion and fulfillment of the Law and effectively completes all of its requirements, obligations or demands for us. Any attempt to place believers back under the Law, even partially, amounts to a rejection of the work of Christ. "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5: 4).

The Law is no longer operative because all its demands were satisfied. Its expiration date has matured and it is no longer in effect since the death of Christ. The Law then has no direct application in the new age of grace. The Law is to the Church what the *Articles of Confederation* is to the United States. They serve great historical value in providing a history that led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution and contain pertinent principles of government decentralization to learn from—but no one is obligated to abide by them any longer. As a system of government it has been retired. The Mosaic Law, like the *Articles of Confederation*, today serves a strictly instructive role; it retains an honorary position as *system emeritus*.

Although, the Law as a binding system has been retired in the plan of God's redemption, it serves an important role in the advice and instruction readers learn from it. The Law offers examples of righteousness and models of holiness. Paul noted that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Romans 15: 4). He adds that the history of Israel serves as an example of learning for the Church today (I Corinthians 10: 6) and that "All Scripture is …profitable for teaching … and for training in righteousness" (I Timothy 3: 16). The Church looks back to the Law for guidance and for the meaning of holiness and righteousness, but never applies the Law in the same way as Israel did as a civil nation. The New Testament writers use the Law as examples of righteousness in the reiteration of the Ten Commandments (Romans 13: 8–10; James 2: 8–11). The Law must be used "lawfully" (I Timothy 1: 8) as instruction and not as a binding operating system.

To argue for subdivision in the Law such as ceremonial, dietary, moral, sacrificial, etc., in essence denies the Law's instructive capacities today. The Law is either obsolete in its entirety or it is operative in its entirety and if it is obsolete yet still instructive, it is instructive in its entirety today. The Law has not been abrogated, as if God

somehow made a mistake. Again it was fulfilled, and hence has accomplished its purpose; its *telos* and reason for existence has been realized. The Law was then retired; it serves now only to instruct in righteousness and to demonstrate sinfulness.

The Law never comes to the Church today unmodified from its original context in ancient Israel. If the so–called "moral law" was binding, then its enforcement and punishment must also be binding. Partial Law advocates must change the meaning of the Law to make it palatable. Every system that adopts an operative role for the Law modifies it to some extent through illegitimately subdividing the Law into convenient sections, in a clear case of selective morality, where only some principles from a given system are conveniently chosen and partially applied through abandoning its original meaning and context to fit a contemporary understanding. For example, Sabbath observance is now on Sunday instead of Saturday or the commandment against adultery applying to a monogamous Christian context instead of its original Hebrew polygamous one.

Without enforcement of the Law there is, in reality, no Law. The Church cannot honestly say it is somehow under the obligations of the Law if also does not keep its enforcement. This is where the entire operative approach to the Law breaks apart into utter incoherence in relation to the New Testament principle of grace. The penalty for most infractions against the Law was death by stoning and was often administrated by a civil and religious authority (Deuteronomy 17). Since the Church does not inherit Israel's civil authority, enforcement of the Mosaic Law becomes impossible[2]. (See my article on the prophetic voice of the Church here.)

As the premiere Law of all time, greater than the Code of Hammurabi, greater than the Qur'an, greater than Roman law (Galatians 3:21), the Mosaic Law offers itself as instruction and example for individual morality and civil society, but

requires no uncontestable obligation regarding its adoption and enforcement. The Law ceases to be a legalistic code that must be enforced to the letter upon pain of death. Instead, it *speaks* as the Word of God. *It now brings life instead of death.* In Christ "the ministry of death" transforms into "the ministry of the Spirit" and life" (2 Corinthians 3).

A New Commandment

Though the Law was fulfilled, accomplished and expired in Christ, and its requirements and penalties no longer directly apply today. This does not mean the Church lives lawlessly and without moral standards. The fulfillment of the Law in Christ means the fulfillment of the Law in his Body, the Church. Jesus and both the Apostles Paul and James stated that the commandment of love fulfills the Law (Matthew 22: 37–40; Mark 12: 29–31; Romans 13: 8–10; Galatians 5: 14; James 2: 8). "Love … is the fulfillment [*plērōma*] of the Law" (Romans 13: 10) The Church, as well as Christ, bring a completion and conclusion to the Law. Jesus left the Church with a new commandment of love that fulfills the old Law. Just as the old Law marked the distinction of Israel as a holy people from the rest of the pagan nations (Deuteronomy 28: 1–2), so the new commandant of love distinguishes the Church from a hostile world system: "A new commandant I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 14: 34, 35).

The old Law was not a failure, so that God had to begin again with a New Commandment of Love. The Law was as Paul said, "weak … through the flesh," (Romans 8: 3), meaning it was simply incapable of producing anything other than the recognition of sin and condemnation (Romans 7: 7–13). It could never save and transform humanity. For that purpose God sent his Son and "condemned sin …in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled [*plēroō*, completed, finished or

accomplished] in us who do not walk according to the flesh [sinful human nature] but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8: 4).

Because believers now have the Holy Spirit, they are new creations (2 Corinthians 5: 17) and the Law is accomplished in them. This does not mean Christians live perfectly as Christ did, but that there are no moral or legal requirements that they must meet as a sign of their acceptance by God; instead of living up to a standard, they live out of the sufficiency of Christ. They are guided by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the New Commandment of Love, also called "the law of the Spirit" (Romans 8: 2), "the law of faith" (Romans 3: 27), "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6: 2) and "the royal law" (James 2: 8), reflecting the image of God in Christ. *Jesus did not leave a legal code to regulate every aspect of life, like Moses; instead he gave the Church an orientation of love and freedom.* Law compels obedience through fear of punishment. It dominates the individual's will so that his choices are not his own. Grace inspires obedience through the revelation of God's love; "the goodness of God leads to repentance" (Romans 2: 4). Law is for the immature or those who cannot act responsibly without it. They need to be told what to do in external and institutional codes. Grace is for the mature who act according to the Law of the Spirit or the spirit of the Law residing internally in every believer. They live by the Spirit at a higher standard of personal accountability to God and not according to the letter of the Law (Matthew 19). Law is for the lawless, not the righteous (I Tim 5: 5-10).

The Internal Law of the Spirit

The Law of the Spirit expresses the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that the Law will be written on the hearts of God's people in a new covenant after God fills them with his Spirit and forgives their sin (Jeremiah 31: 31–34; Ezekiel 36: 24–27; Hebrews 8: 7–13; 12: 24). Believers are not

accountable to the Law, but may approach God through Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest and Mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2: 5; Hebrews 4: 14; 7: 18-19). Grace supplies believers with a greater righteousness and accessibility directly to God, in contrast to the Law of Moses, because as grace fulfills all the requirements of the Law, it also provides both personal transformation and purity of heart through faith. It is not enough to simply *not* commit murder or adultery. One must not harbor hate or lust also (Matthew 5). The Law—is now internalized in believers through the Holy Spirit.

The new Law of the Spirit (i.e., the Law of Love) continues where the old Law left off. But this new law is different from the old because it can only be accepted by faith, a committed trust in the unseen Word of God (2 Corinthians 4: 16—5:7; Hebrews 11: 1—12: 3) as a gift of God's grace, which makes the old Law a law of works, not a law of faith (Romans 3: 27). Abraham understood that "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). Anyone living righteously knew it even when they were under the Law—that keeping the Law was impossible, requiring grace (Romans 4). The Law required moral and legal perfection, complete and total obedience or works, requiring human effort in order to achieve acceptance with God. Any attempt to work one's way back to God on the basis of keeping the Law disqualifies one from salvation by grace through faith (Romans 3—5). "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (Galatians 2: 21).

Christians are not justified by grace through faith, only to be sanctified by works either the works of the Law or any other code of conduct. Theologically, Evangelicals typically divide the term salvation into three stages: *justification*, a positional salvation that can never be revoked; *sanctification*, a lifestyle that reflects justification, and *glorification*, the end result of salvation when believers are

restored to the complete image of God in the *eschaton*[3]. The Church often struggles the most with the middle stage of sanctification, asserting the need for a code of conduct as many Evangelicals do or even a sacramental merit system as Roman Catholics accept that measures the believer's progress and growth towards Christlikeness. Although most Evangelicals will hotly deny that they are setting up a new works salvation system in their codes, the practical effects are the same: justification is by faith and sanctification is by works.

The Ontology of Salvation

Grace represents a temporal discontinuity in the plan of God within an overall eternal continuity. The coming of Christ was a radical disruption in the nature of things (ontology) and punctuated history with grace. The new age of grace, only foreshadowed and hoped for in the previous time, was always in view in God's plan of redemption. But until the coming of Christ there was no tangible mechanism to dispense Grace to humanity. Law never acts as a means of salvation, even if there was someone who kept it perfectly, such as Saul of Tarsus (Philippians 3: 6) .

Good behavior does not eradicate the guilt of original sin, simply doing more good works to outweigh our evil ones will do nothing to accomplish salvation, which is the whole substance of the ancient debate between law and grace from Jesus and the Pharisees, to Paul and the Judaizers, to Augustine and Pelagius to the Reformers and the Catholics. It manifests today in the Free Grace Gospel versus Lordship Salvation position as well as the numerous attempts to reassert the principle of law in the Church to act as a hedge against *antinomianism* and moral *libertinism*.

The human condition remains so stricken with sin that only a divine intervention will save people from condemnation. No amount of good deeds—even if they were perfect—could erase the curse of sin inherited from the First Adam (Romans 5: 12–21).

Salvation must be ontological and not simply moral. There must be a change in *being* and not merely a change in *doing*. This means there must be a change in the spiritual condition of people and not simply a moral or behavioral change. God does not forgive sin without compensation for sin. Salvation requires more than just a divine act of will to rescue humanity, which then translates to morality and law (or contemporary manifestations of *moralism* and *legalism)*. This bears out in the New Testament in the struggle between law and grace or works and faith. One position focuses on *ontology* (the transformation of the spiritual condition or essence) and the other on morality (human effort or works). Salvation focuses on either God or man; either God saves humanity by grace or humanity contributes through its merits to its own forgiveness and restoration.

Human nature tends to self–righteousness and belief in its own ability to earn the grace of God expressed in morality and law, or what Paul called "works." Morality means the choices people make based on what they think is right or wrong. Law, that is "Policy" in human terms, is the morality of a few people enforced on the majority, through institutional and legally binding codes of behavior. The modern world has adopted a humanistic perspective that sees humanity as preeminent, not God; it has abandoned ontology and metaphysics.[4] In lieu of metaphysics, the modern world uses morality and law as a guide to life; it creates an understanding of God in its own moral image as glorified law–giver and not the Spirit who changes hearts, minds and lives. Thus Christianity and all religion are reduced to morality as opposed to faith, which is irrelevant to the modern world.

Christianity appears increasingly moralistic and legalistic where a code of behavior replaces living faith in God. This manifests in everything from health and eating rules and dress codes, to Prohibition and club or church membership; middle

class family values become identical with Christianity: ideals such as a high work ethic, patriotism, and belief in *Christian America*. Voting becomes a sacred duty, keeping the Ten Commandments becomes emphasized, along with political activism, and so forth. None of these are bad, but they are never a replacement for faith. Yet, they often are made the test of faith and their presence is often mistaken for a vital life in Christ. These things represent morality and even Christian morality, but morality should never be confused with faith and salvation. Salvation is not morality, it is an ontological change in the condition of the human heart and its relationship with God through the Spirit that is freely given and accepted by faith alone. Morality does not constitute the elements of faith, it follows faith as a natural consequence (Ephesians 2: 8–10), and must never be the measure of faith (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; 10: 12–33).

Moralism: The American Heresy

The common sense approach to religion in America argues that people are responsible for their own actions and therefore can make amends for their misdeeds with good deeds. Although, this position is not false, we need to seek to correct and learn from our mistakes, it makes no difference to one's spiritual condition, which can only change by faith in the person and work of Christ.

Theologically speaking, most of the American Church has followed the classic heresy known as Pelagianism,[5] a belief that denies the inherent sinful condition. Pelagius the fourth century monk and arch opponent of St. Augustine argued that original sin does not exist as the guilt humanity inherits from the First Adam and that Adam's sin was his own. The human race cannot be held accountable for a sin they did not commit. People are born innocent into a corrupt environment and only become sinful after they have sinned. On the surface this doctrine appears rational and fair, but cuts the heart out of

the principle of grace and throws all religion back into a legalist and moralist mode. Without a notion of original sin, today called "radical evil," or "total depravity," or simply the "sinful human nature," it makes perfect sense that the way back to God is through being a good person or moral reformation. As theologian Paul Tillich noted "[Pelagianism] … is always effective in us when we try to force God down to ourselves. This is what we usually call 'moralism,'…. Pelagius said that good and evil are performed by us; they are not given [or an ontic condition, meaning we are not born into a state of sin; rather we become sinners through our own misdeeds or sins]. If this is true then religion is in danger of being transformed into morality."[6]

The principle of grace advocated by the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine and the Reformers radically opposes moralism and makes salvation a matter of a divine intervention in the human condition that can be received only by faith. Works do nothing to alter the human condition of sin and condemnation. No moral or legal remedy exists that will change our basic sinful selves. Moral transformation (works) follows faith, but has no causal effect on salvation or loss of salvation. What God gives in grace he will not revoke (Rom 8: 26-39; 11: 29). Grace is not an excuse or license for sin. Those who argue that way simply do not understand grace and its transforming effects on moral character, nor have they ever participated in it (Rom 6). "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6: 14)!

Endnotes

1. For an article on how Millennial generation Americans display, among other traits, a tendency to be what sociologist Christian Smith dubs moralistic therapeutic deists, see: www.probe.org/is-this-the-last-christian-generation/

2. Lawrence Terlizzese, *Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics*, Probe Ministries, 2012,

www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/.

3. The time when God completes His plan of redemption.

4. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 44.

5. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 124-25.

6. Ibid., 125.

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Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale

Frederick Buechner is one of my favorite authors, probably top five. He's a brilliant storyteller, who, like Shakespeare, understands both the peasant and the prince and writes stories that all at once capture them both, stories that are magical yet earthy.

In *Telling the Truth*, a book about communicating the gospel of Christ, Buechner provides his readers several engaging (and true) stories to help illustrate what it means to tell the truth with our lives, including a very compelling story from the life of the famous (and infamous) 19th-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher. Later Buechner tells us the story of Jesus before Pilate, but as if it were happening in 1977. And it's real. What I mean is, it isn't cheesy. As I'm reading it I

believe it could have happened in 1977 like I'm watching it happen on some old rerun. Buechner does this with several stories from the Scriptures, and I read these stories with fresh eyes and new perspective.

And this is part of telling the truth: making new metaphors and painting contemporary word pictures so that people who have ears to hear…. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because the truth is silence before it is spoken, Buechner points out:

> *He [Pilate] says, "What is truth?" and by way of an answer, the man with the split lip doesn't say a blessed thing. Or else his not saying anything, that is the blessed thing. […]*
>
> *The one who hears the truth that is silence before it is a word is Pilate, and he hears it because he has asked to hear it, and he has asked to hear it—"What is truth?" he asks—because in a world of many truths and half-truths he is hungry for truth itself or, failing that, at least for the truth that there is no truth. We are all of us Pilate in our asking after truth, and when we come to church to ask it, the preacher would do well to answer us also with silence because the truth and the Gospel are one, and before the Gospel is a word, it too like truth is silence—not an ordinary silence, silence as nothing to hear, but silence that makes itself heard if you listen to it the way Pilate listens to the silence of the man with the split lip. The Gospel that is truth is good news, but before it is good news, let us say that it is just news. Let us say that it is the evening news, the television news, but with the sound turned off.*
>
> *Picture that then, the video without the audio, the news with, for the moment, no words to explain it or explain it away, no words to cushion or sharpen the shock of it, no definition given to dispose of it with…. {1}*

We are all of us the preacher too—we do call ourselves evangelicals, after all—and we would all do well to reacquaint

ourselves with the silence that is, the silence that speaks into the silence that isn't, the silence of the rocks crying out Jesus' gospel truth. So how do we listen to the pregnant silence? How do we grab hold of the gift of truth Jesus is offering *us* as he offered to Pilate when Pilate asked after it? One way we do this, Buechner tells us, is by listening to our lives. All of it {2}: the tragedy, the comedy, and the fairy tale. Your car that was stolen, your marital affair, your friend who betrayed you, the iPhone you own but can't afford, the self-righteousness you feel about someone else's affair, materialism, tax-collecting…that is the *tragedy*. And the *comedy* is that part which is both your wedding day and the day you fall in the toilet because he left the seat up, both "a kind of terrible funniness and of a happy end to all that is terrible". {3}

Finally, we must listen to our lives within the overarching framework of *fairy tale*. Because the tragic and the comic isn't all that's there. The fairy tale is the spell lifted and the Beast becoming on the outside the handsome prince he had become on the inside; it's the beautiful step-sisters whose feet turned out to be too fat and ugly like the sisters were in their hearts; it is those moments in our lives when we give to the least of these in spite of ourselves because once upon a time we climbed up the tree a cold opportunist and climbed down a caring, and cared for, philanthropist.

This listening to life—our own lives and the lives of others, the darkness and joyousness and impossible possibility of transformation into newness that we all share—listening to all of it in the silence before we finally but restlessly fall asleep or start our car or pour our coffee; and then also listening to the rustling of our tossing and turning, the cranking of the engine, the brewing of our coffee…this listening enables us to tell the truth.

Coupled with this Buechner reminds us we must also listen to the artists of our time and the times before us:

> *There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of the poets, playwrights, novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God in the world, and about the storm of his absence, both without and within, which, because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm.* {4}

We would of course add the film writer / director. Fiction is such an important informer of the gospel, I cannot image how shallow my theology would be without it. Likewise, if I didn't discipline myself to listen to others, my theology would be shallow. And I recognize that some are gifted with a propensity for listening to nature, some to microbiology, some to art, some to numbers, some to everyday chores. But we each of us regardless of which comes more naturally can grow through the Holy Spirit in our spiritual ability to listen. More importantly, we all must learn to lean on one another: he who has ears for music learns from she who has ears for engineering, for example—and she learns from him, too.

Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale is a small book divided into four chapters that brings us a refreshing look at sharing the gospel. It's refreshing because it is the whole, honest truth, not only about the world, but about our own hearts. "So if preachers or lecturers are going to say anything that really matters to anyone including themselves," Buechner, the ordained, "part-time novelist, Christian, pig" {5} knowingly tells us,

> *they must say it not just to the public part of us that considers interesting thoughts about the gospel and how to preach it, but to the private, inner part too, to the part of us all where our dreams come from, both our good dreams and our bad dreams, the inner part where thoughts mean less than images, elucidation less than evocation, where our concern is*

> *less with how the gospel is to be preached than with what the gospel is and what it is to us. They must address themselves to the fullness of who we are and the emptiness too, the emptiness where grace and peace belong but mostly are not, because terrible as well as wonderful things have happened to us all.* [6]

And so, Buechner being a gifted, contemplative listener to life and literature, uses everyday life to tell gospel history in fresh ways, and uses those stories together with the poetry of the prophets, the magic of familiar fairy tales, and the masterpieces of some of Buechner's favorite writers to tell the truth, which is the gospel, in hopes that his telling the truth will help us tell it too.

1. Buechner, Frederick, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (HarperCollins, NY, 1977), p. 14

2. Ibid, p. 34

3. Ibid. p. 6.

4. Ibid, p. 44.

5. Buechner, A film about writer and minister Frederick Buechner, directed by: Rob Collins (CustomFlix Studio, 2004) http://amzn.to/pTUeeD.

6. Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, p. 4.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2010/01/26/telling-the-truth/

Hell: The Horrible Choice

Dr. Pat Zukeran presents the biblical teaching on hell so that we can present a sound response when challenged.

The Importance of Understanding the Doctrine of Hell

Why study the doctrine of hell? Very few sermons today are preached on this topic, and most Christians try to avoid the subject. However, this is an important doctrine for Christians to understand especially if we are going to share our faith in the postmodern culture that despises this teaching.

Dr. Peter Kreeft and Ron Tacelli write:

> Of all the doctrines in Christianity, hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe and the first to be abandoned. The critic's case against it seems very strong, and the believer's duty to believe it seems unbearable. . . . Heaven is far more important than hell, we know much more about it, and it is meant to occupy our mind much more centrally. But in a battle an army must rush to defend that part of the line which is most attacked or which seems the weakest. Though other doctrines are more important than this one, this one is not unimportant or dispensable.{1}

Several critics of Christianity grew up in the church but eventually abandoned the faith, and many of them cite the teaching on hell as a key factor. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in his work *Why I Am Not a Christian*:

> I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. . . . I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a

> doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture: and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.{2}

Charles Darwin grew up and was baptized in the Church of England. Despite his rejection of Christianity, he was buried in Westminster Abbey. Darwin has pointed to the doctrine of hell as one of the significant reasons for his abandonment of the faith. He stated in his autobiography, "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."{3}

I am sure that many of us have friends who find the Bible's teaching on hell to be offensive and use this doctrine to paint the God of the Bible as a cruel and vindictive being. However, most unbelievers' attacks of this doctrine are built on a false understanding of hell. Christians also have difficulty defending the justice of hell with the love of God because we lack a proper understanding of what the Bible teaches. In this article, I will present the biblical teaching on hell so that we can present a sound response when challenged.

The Nature of Hell

Hell is basically a place of eternal separation from God. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 states that those without God "will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power." To be separated from God is to be separated from all that is good. A person in hell is separated from all the joy, love, and meaning for which we were created. Instead of knowing God as a

loving father, one will know God as judge (Romans 2: 5-8). That is the attribute of God an unbeliever will know for eternity.

Many, including Christians, believe that God tortures people in hell. However, a significant thing to note is that in the New Testament, hell is not described as a place of *torture* but rather a place of *torment* (Luke 16:23-28, Revelation 14:11). Torture is inflicted against one's will, while torment is self-inflicted by one's own will. Torment comes from the mental and physical anguish of knowing we used our freedom for evil and chose wrongly. The anguish results from the sorrow and shame of the judgment of being forever away from God and all that is meaningful and joyful. Everyone in hell will know that the pain he or she is suffering is self-induced. The flames of hell are generated by the individual who has rejected God. It is not a place where people are forced against their will to undergo agonizing pain. Unbelievers often use this image to portray God as a cruel and vindictive being. However, the torment of hell comes from the individual who chooses not to love God and now must live with the sorrow of being aware of all that was lost.

One of the most severe punishments leveled on a criminal is the sentence of solitary confinement. One of the reasons this is a feared sentence is that the guilty are left to sit alone in their cells and live with the regret and sorrow of their crimes with no one to comfort or minister to them. Pain comes from within as they wrestle alone with their thoughts and emotions. It must be a horrible realization to see lost forever what could have been.

Such is the anguish of hell. The pain comes from the regret of all that was lost. A person experiences separation from God, the ultimate good. This is why hell is such a horrible place and a horrible choice.

Why Hell Is Necessary and Just

Is hell necessary? How is this doctrine consistent with a God of love? These are questions I face when I speak on the fate of unbelievers. The necessity and justice of hell can be recognized when we understand the nature of God and the nature of man.

Hell is necessary because God's *justice* requires it. Our culture focuses mostly on God's nature of love, mercy, and grace. However, God is also just and holy, and this must be kept in balance. Justice demands retribution, the distribution of rewards and punishments in a fair way. God's holiness demands that He separate himself entirely from sin and evil (Habakkuk 1:13). The author of Psalm 73 struggles with the dilemma of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Joseph Stalin was responsible for the death of millions in the Soviet Union, but he died peacefully in his sleep without being punished for his deeds. Since evil often goes unpunished in this lifetime, it must be dealt with at a future time to fulfill God's justice and holiness.

A second reason hell is necessary is that God's *love* requires it. Love does not force itself on an individual, but honors the option of rejecting the love of another. Those who do not wish to love God must be allowed not to do so. Forcing oneself upon another is to dishonor the dignity and right of the individual. Those who do not want to be with God in this lifetime, will not be forced to be with Him for all eternity. It is important to understand that heaven is where God dwells and being the Lord of all creation, He is the heart and focus of heaven. His glory fills the entire realm, and inhabitants of heaven will be in His immediate and intimate presence for eternity. One cannot be in heaven and not know the presence of God. Therefore, those who do not want to be with God in this lifetime will not be forced to be in His presence for all eternity. Instead, God will honor their desire and let them

dwell apart from Him in hell. Love honors the right of the other person to reject that love.

Third, God's *sovereignty* requires hell. If there is no hell, there would be no final victory over evil. If there were no ultimate separation of good from evil, good would not ultimately triumph and God would not be in ultimate control. God declares He will have victory over evil (1 Corinthians 15:24-28 and Revelation 20-22). God will defeat evil by quarantining evil and separating it from good eternally.

The biblical teaching on hell fulfills the justice, holiness, and sovereignty of God and remains consistent with His character of love.

Why Hell?

Hell is also necessary because of the nature of man.

Human *depravity* requires hell. The only just punishment for sin against the eternal God is eternal punishment. God is absolutely perfect and mankind is sinful.

Romans 3:23 states that all are guilty of sin and fall far short of God's perfect standard. Sinful, unrepentant man cannot stand before a holy and perfect God. In order for God to maintain His perfection and the perfection of heaven, sin must be accounted for. For those who have received the gift of God's grace, sin has been cleansed by the payment of Christ's life. Those who have rejected Christ remain guilty of sin. Heaven cannot be a perfect paradise if sin is present. Therefore, man's sin requires separation from God.

Second, human *dignity* requires hell. God created us as free moral creatures, and He will not force people into His presence if they do not want to be there. If a person chooses not to be with God in his or her lifetime, He will respect that decision. In Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus weeps over the city

of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel because they rejected their savior and thus were not willing to accept the love of God. Christ as Lord of creation could have forced His will on His creatures, but instead respected their decision even though it broke His heart.

My grandfather suffered a stroke as the result of high blood pressure, a high level of cholesterol, and a few other ailments. While in the hospital, the doctors recommended a diet and treatment program. However, he found the diet and treatment not to his liking. The doctor explained the treatment and the ramifications if my grandfather would not change his lifestyle. He chose not to follow the doctor's prescription. Even though the doctor knew the serious consequences that would follow, he respected my grandfather's wish and allowed him to return home. In the same way, although God knows the consequences of our choice, He respects our dignity and honors our decision.

Romans 1 states that all have had an opportunity to respond to God's invitation and are therefore without excuse. Human beings are created in God's image and are creatures of incredible value. God does not annihilate beings of value even though they rejected His love. Instead He respects their decision, honors their dignity, and allows them to dwell eternally apart from Him as they have chosen.

God's justice and love plus man's nature requires a hell.

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Recently I was in a enjoying a pleasant discussion with an atheist named Gus. After answering most of his objections against Christianity, he paused for a moment of contemplation. He then leaned over the table and said, "I find it hard to believe in a God of love who says, 'Love me or I will throw you into the fire!'"

This statement represents a common misunderstanding. God does not send anyone to hell; people choose to go there.

I explained that God is a loving God, and His earnest desire is that all turn from sin and receive His gift of eternal life. 2 Peter 3:9 states, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” God desires all to be saved and has made the way possible by sending His son to die in our place. He invites everyone to accept His free gift of eternal life through Christ.

Since God’s desire is that all be saved and He has made this possible for all men, God cannot bear the blame for people going to hell. People go to hell because they knowingly choose to reject His love. C. S. Lewis said, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘*Thy* will be done.’ “{4}

God’s love also keeps Him from imposing His will on individuals. If a person does not want to be with God in this lifetime, He will not force that person to be with Him for all eternity. In other words, the door of hell is locked from the inside.

After a brief moment, Gus asked, “Do people really have a choice since the Bible states that we are all born sinners and cannot help but sin?” I acknowledged that we are born in sin (Psalm 51) and have a bent to sin. However, our sin nature does not force us to sin. We are sinners and it is inevitable that we will disobey God. However, we can avoid sinning and often do so because disobedience to God involves a choice we make. We can choose otherwise. In a similar way although we are on the road to destruction, we can decide to get off that road and choose life.

What about predestination, some may ask? Does that not negate one's ability to choose? There are various views on this doctrine but it does not negate our responsibility to repent. God holds us accountable for our decisions, and this responsibility implies the ability to respond. Although we as finite beings may not fully comprehend this doctrine, that does not excuse us from the choice we must all make about Christ.

The sad news is that all who go to hell could avoid going there, but they make a horrible choice.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 282.
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1957), 17-18.
3. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwi*n, ed. Nora Darwin Barlow, with original omissions restored (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1993), 87.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan), 69.

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Miracles

Miracles: What Are They?

Have you noticed how often the word *miracle* is used these days? Skin creams that make us look younger; computer

technology; the transition of a nation from oppression to freedom; what a quarterback needs to pull off for his team to have a winning season. All these are called *miracles* today. Anything that takes extreme effort or which amazes people is now a miracle. I'm still amazed that airplanes stay in the air. But is that a *miracle*?

To begin our discussion we'll first put forth a definition. To clarify the nature of a miracle will also require making distinctions in God's activities in creation. Then we'll respond to objections to the possibility of miracles. Finally, we'll consider their apologetic use.

So, what is a miracle? In his book, *All the Miracles of the Bible,* Herbert Lockyer said that a miracle is "some extraordinary work of deity transcending the ordinary powers of nature and wrought in connection with the ends of revelation."{1} Notice the three elements: miracles are supernatural, or the work of deity; they transcend or override natural law; and they are part of God's means of revealing His nature and purposes to us.

In Acts. 2:22, Peter speaks of the "miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through" Jesus. This reference to *miracles* can also be translated *power*. Miracles demonstrate the supernatural power of God over nature and evil forces. This power was seen in Jesus' healing the sick; calming the storm; and raising people from the dead. Such events occurred in opposition to the normal course of nature; they could only be done by a supernatural power.

The word *wonders* refers to the response the miracles evoked in the observers, a response of astonishment and fear. Observers knew they had seen something out of the ordinary, something that in its greatness could even be threatening to them.

Still a third word used by Peter in Acts 2:22 points to the revelatory purpose of miracles. There, Peter referred to the

signs of Jesus. This word stresses that aspect of miracles which draws attention to the significance of the event. Signs point to or reveal something else.

First, they indicated a relationship between the miracle worker and God. In John 5:36 Jesus said that his works were evidence that he had been sent by God. Second, they pointed to a fuller activity of God still to come. As one writer said: "The power Jesus exhibited was a foretaste of the power to be revealed at the end of the age."{2}

Also, miracles are revelatory themselves in that they reveal the nature of God. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. He *said* he was the Savior, and he *showed* he was the Savior by doing saving things. He healed diseases; he delivered the demon-possessed; he saved from the fury of the storm.

So, miracles are from God; they override nature; and they reveal God. They aren't simply amazing events. When just about *anything* amazing is called a miracle simply *because* it's amazing, real miracles lose their significance.

Miracles and Providence

The word *miracle* is used so often and to describe so many things that it's lost its power. One of the reasons events are called miracles which shouldn't be—at least by Christians—is that we want to give due honor to God for His work in our lives. This is how it should be. However, in order to give miracles their due, we should distinguish the different kinds of activity of God in this world.

We can think of God's involvement in three categories. First, what we call *providence,* which is God's ongoing work in sustaining the universe He created and the people in it. He keeps the stars in place; He provides for our physical needs; and He is active in the governing of societies. People have come to learn that things work a certain way, whether they are

believers in God or not. No explicit belief in God is necessary to explain such things. Events on this level are not miracles.

Second, God is active in what we might call *special providence*. "Special providences," said theologian Louis Berkhof, "are special combinations in the order of events, as in the answer to prayer, in deliverance out of trouble, and in all instances in which grace and help come in critical circumstances."{3} God's hand is "visible" in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way.

Our move to Texas to work with Probe is an example. When we survey all the events that led up to our move, we recognize that God had to have been involved. But that's because we set these events in the context of the thinking, the decisions, and the prayers of people who sought God's will. However, people who aren't inclined to see God working in our lives would see nothing supernatural about such events. They might simply see that we made a decision to move, the leadership of Probe and our church concurred, and a bunch of other people who support us agreed. Is this type of occurrence a miracle? In my opinion it isn't. Although God was involved in a special way, the laws of nature weren't transcended.

The third category of God's involvement is *miracles* that we defined earlier as events, which are supernatural in origin, transcend or violate natural laws, and serve a revelatory function in God's redemptive work. Here the hand of God is clearly visible to anyone who doesn't deliberately refuse to believe. The event is contrary to the normal course of nature; no scientific explanation is possible. Of a purported miracle, we might ask this question: Is it impossible that the event could have taken place without God's special intervention to alter the inevitable course of nature?

These three categories are not rigidly divided. They form more

of a continuum. The distinguishing mark is the visibility of God's hand in a given event. Is He in the background, simply maintaining His created order? Or has He manipulated certain events to a certain end without making His presence clearly seen by all? Or has He acted so powerfully in the realm of nature that there is no other reasonable explanation?

The purpose of such considerations is that we might not use the word *miracle* too lightly. To accomplish their role, miracles must remain distinct from that which is simply amazing.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and Natural Law

Miracles have come under attack for centuries now. In short, objectors seem to assume that *our* lives' experience is normative. With respect to *environment*, it is assumed that what we see in nature is all there is or can be. With respect to *time,* also, critics say that our experience *today* determines what could have happened *yesterday*, or that our limitations do not allow us to know what happened in the past. Let's consider first the question of nature, and then at the problem of historical knowledge with respect to miracles.

Miracles came under heavy attack during the Enlightenment by deists and atheists, and later by liberal churchmen. In the heady days of the rise of science, many came to see miracles as violations of natural law. To the rationalists of that day, such a violation was an impossibility. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, put it this way: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{4}

This raises two questions. First, are natural laws inviolable? Second, how do we interpret the evidence?

First, the question of natural law. Some critics believe simply that there is no power higher than nature and thus no power that could supersede the laws of nature. This is naturalism, a philosophical belief that can't itself be proved by what is seen in nature. This is a philosophical assumption, and we shouldn't be put off by it. We believe that God exists, and being the creator of the natural laws, He is above them Himself and able to alter them. They don't. To undermine the possibility of miracles, naturalists must prove there is no God to perform them. On the other hand, if we can show that non-natural events *did* or *have* occurred, the naturalist will have to find some explanation in his worldview for them.

Other critics may not argue from an atheistic standpoint, but they hold that a universe in which natural laws can be broken is inherently unstable. If miracles occurred, all would be chaos. We answer that if God is powerful enough to create nature and to override its laws, He is also powerful enough to keep the rest of nature in order.

Thus, the reality of natural law is no deterrent to miracles.

Second, how do we weigh the evidence for and against miracles? What about Hume's objection that there is more evidence *against* miracles than *for* them? First, the abundant evidence of order at most suggests that miracles are the rare exception. But this is what makes them so significant! Consider, too, that the proper use of evidences includes being open to new evidences, including those of unusual occurrences. Second, evidences should be *weighed*, not just *counted*. So, to illustrate, we are more likely to accept the testimony of one person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts.

As I noted earlier, arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. But there is another kind of objection to miracles. That is, that history can't bear the weight of

proving miracles occurred in the past. We'll turn our attention to that objection next.

Philosophical Attacks: Miracles and History

We have looked briefly at David Hume's argument against miracles based on natural law. On the surface, Hume's argument was against *proving* a miracle, not against the *reality* of miracles *per se*. His main point was that we can't *know* whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always *for* natural law and *against* miracles. He believed that it would be more likely, that, for example, all the witnesses *lied* than that a person was raised from the dead. How was Hume so sure of this? "Because," he said, 'that has never been observed in any age or country."{5} So, when someone *said* they *saw* a miracle, Hume said they were deluded or were lying because no one's ever seen a miracle! It seems clear that Hume's argument against *knowing* whether a miracle occurred was based upon his prior *conviction* that miracles don't occur.

Of course, if no evidence could be sufficient to prove miracles in the present, records of miracles in history were surely faulty. If we don't experience miracles today, Hume thought, there's no reason to think others did in the past.

Anthony Flew, a contemporary philosopher, has built on Hume's argument. He says there must be uniformity between the present (the time of the historian) and the past (when the event took place) to make any reasonable interpretation of the past. This is called the *rule of analogy*. The regularities of nature are part of our present experience, and we must assume they were the experience of people in the past.

This argument presupposes that there are no miracles occurring now. How do critics know this? Either they must be omniscient, or they must begin with a naturalistic worldview which by

definition precludes miracles. One also wonders how Flew could accept *any* unique, singular event in history, such as the origins of the universe and of life, if regularity is a requirement for historical knowledge.

Other critics say the problem is with the study of history *per se*. They argue that historical knowledge is too subjective for us to know what really happened in the past. Our own values, worldviews and prejudices color our understanding so that there aren't any historically objective facts. But if this is so, the critic's own judgment about historical knowledge is too colored by his own values, etc., to be taken as objective fact. As philosopher Frances Beckwith notes, this also means that no interpretation of history can be considered bad, and that there is no reason to revise history (except perhaps for the historian's amusement).{6}

It would seem that those who deny miracles are typically predisposed against them. If this is the case, is there any apologetic use for miracles? Let's look at this next.

The Apologetic Use of Miracles

"Miracle was once the foundation of all apologetics, then it became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear." So said a German theologian in the early part of this century.{7} While it's true that evidential apologetics emphasizes the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in general play little role in apologetics today.

What's the proper role of miracles in apologetics? First, of course, Christians need to answer the charge that miracles can't happen, and that the Bible, therefore, isn't true. Miracles are an integral part of Christianity; to side-step objections to them by downplaying their role is to abandon the cause.

But what about persuasion? In Scripture, were miracles used as evidence to persuade unbelievers?

We see in the New Testament that miracles *did* serve as evidence and they brought some people to belief. When Jesus raised Lazarus “many of the Jews . . . put their faith in Him” (Jn.11:45; see also Acts 2:22-41; 5:12-16; 6:7,8; 8:6-8; Rom. 15:18,19). But note that some went to the Pharisees and ratted on Jesus.At other times Jesus chastised the Pharisees because they believed neither His words nor His works (Jn.10:22-32; 15:24). Not everyone believed in response to miracles (cf. Acts 14:3,4).

Remember that Jesus didn’t do miracles for people who had no faith-such as the people in His hometown (Matt. 13:58)—or for those who insisted that He prove Himself to them-such as the Jewish leaders (Matt. 16:1-4). When He ministered in His hometown, for instance, people took offense at Him, and Matthew says, “He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith”. Matthew also reports that Jesus refused the Jewish leaders when they came to Him “and tested Him by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven” (16:1-4)

No, Jesus’ miracles were done in response to faith. But this wasn’t necessarily explicit faith in Jesus as Savior. It could have been simply the openness to God of people who were willing to hear. By doing miracles, Jesus identified himself as the Messiah who had been prophesied.{8} People either recognized the fulfillment of prophecy or simply recognized the hand of God, or both.

Someone might ask, even if people won’t accept miracles, might they not respond to the simple preaching of the cross? Remember that miracles were part of God’s revelation of His redemptive activity. They were set in the context of the spoken message of Jesus. People who refused the spoken word also refused to accept the evidence of miracles. As Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus’ parable, “If they do not listen

to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Lk.16:31)

Thus, in answer to the question whether miracles can bring people to belief in Christ, they can if the deep-down knowledge of God that Paul said we all have (Rom.1:20) is first awakened. But for those who have deliberately shut God out of their lives and their worldview, miracles won't do any more to convince them than hearing Scripture will.

Miracles, then, provide evidence for the identity of Jesus and for the truth of the message He proclaimed especially when paired with prophecy. They should thus be a part of the package of evidences we employ. We will not convince everyone of the truth of Jesus Christ. But if God chose miracles as confirming evidence, we should not shun them.

Notes

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 13-14.

2. Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Might," by O. Betz

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 168.

4. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Activity in History* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 89-90

7. Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

8. Ibid., 286-87.

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One Minute After Death – A Christian Understanding of What Happens at Death

Rusty Wright examines the question of what happens to us after we die. Many Christians have questions about this and there is a lot of information floating around on the topic. Rusty applies a biblical worldview perspective to explain a distinctly Christian view of this topic we all have an interest in. When we examine the Bible, we can develop a clearer picture of God's answer to this question.

This article is also available in Spanish.

"I was dying. I heard the doctor pronounce me dead. As I lay on the operating table of the large hospital, a loud, harsh buzzing began to reverberate in my head. At the same time, I sensed myself moving quickly through a long, dark tunnel. Then suddenly I found myself outside my own physical body! Like a spectator, I watched the doctor's desperate attempts to revive my corpse.

"Soon…I encountered a 'being' of light who showed me an instant replay of my life and helped me evaluate my past deeds.

"Finally I learned that my time to die had not yet come and that I had to return to my body. I resisted, for I had found my afterlife experience to be quite pleasant. Yet somehow I

was reunited with my physical body and lived."{1} Many people have reported near-death experiences (NDEs). What do they mean? What happens when we die?

While writing a book on this subject, I interviewed people with fascinating stories. A Kansas woman developed complications after major surgery. She sensed herself rising out of her body, soaring through space, and hearing heavenly voices before returning to her body.

An Arizona man in a coma five months after a motorcycle accident said he saw his deceased father, who spoke with him.

Various theories attempt to explain these NDEs. Physiological explanations suggest a physical cause—perhaps a blow to the head or lack of oxygen in the brain. Pharmacological explanations point to drugs or anesthetics. Psychological explanations propose mental causes such as defense mechanisms or wish fulfillment. Spiritual explanations cite NDEs as previews of the afterlife, either genuine (if divine) or distorted (if demonic). Applications of these theories can be complex.{2} During my sophomore year at Duke University, the student in the room next to mine was struck by lightning and killed instantly. For days our fraternity was in a state of shock. People were asking questions such as, "Where is Mike now?" "Is there life after death?" "If so, what is it like?"

LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Can we know whether there is life after death? What method would we use to find out?

The experimental method, useful for scientific questions, is inadequate for evaluating NDEs. It is impossible in medical emergencies to establish the required controlled situations and repeatability. Scientists also have no mind-reading machines to evaluate mental/spiritual experiences. And finding volunteers for NDE experiments would be difficult.

The experiential method receives mixed reviews. NDEs can provide useful information, but the mind can trick us. Dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, drug trips, drunkenness, states of shock—all can evoke mental images that seem real but aren't.

Some suggest a spiritual method for evaluating these phenomena. What if we could find a spiritual authority, someone with trustworthy credentials, to tell us the truth about afterlife issues?

Following Mike's death, I explained to the men in our fraternity that an increasing number of educated men and women believe that Jesus Christ is a trustworthy spiritual authority. Once I, myself, was skeptical of Christianity, but examining the evidences for Jesus' resurrection convinced me He could be trusted. I found the resurrection of Christ one of the best attested facts of history.{3} If Jesus died and came back from the dead, He could accurately tell us what death and the afterlife are like. The fact that He successfully predicted His own resurrection helps us believe that He will tell us the truth about the afterlife. What did Jesus and those He taught say about it?

WHAT IS THE AFTERLIFE LIKE?

Jesus indicated that the afterlife will be personal.

Our personalities will not be annihilated. We won't blend into the great impersonal ocean of cosmic consciousness, as some propose. We will continue to exist. We will not become angels, as others suggest. Angels are "ministering spirits" sent out to serve believers in Christ.{4} They are already-created beings, distinct from humans.{5} At the moment Jesus died on the cross He cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Earlier, a thief who hung on a cross next to His said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responded,

“I tell you the truth. today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42-43).

Jesus believed that His own spirit was going to be with God. He also believed that the thief (apparently the thief’s soul or spirit) would be with Him in heaven that same day. Clearly, Jesus was not thinking of death as annihilation but as a separation from the physical body.

Elsewhere Jesus implied that our personalities somehow remain intact after death. He once said, “Many will come. . .and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the forefathers of the Jewish nation—had died centuries earlier. Yet Jesus, speaking about a future event, mentioned them by name. He implied that their personalities were maintained.

Did you ever wonder if you’ll be able to see departed loved ones after you die? Apparently those who participate in eternal life will be able to recognize each other. King David, who reigned over the ancient nation of Israel around 1000 B.C., spoke of being with his dead son again.{6} Jesus’ disciples once caught a glimpse of Moses and Elijah, two long-dead heroes of Israel, and recognized them. {7}

Jesus taught that eternal life will be relational.

Life in heaven will focus on a personal relationship with Him and on meaningful relationships with each other. These will be the warmest and most enriching relationships we could ever have.

Before His death, Jesus promised His disciples that one day they would be with Him again: “I am going. . .to prepare a place for you. And. . .I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3).

Paul, a first-century believer in Jesus, wrote about his “desire to depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23).

Jesus defined life in heaven when He said, “This is eternal life: that they [people who believe in Him] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In other words, eternal life will involve getting to know God and the meaning of life better.

Eternal life will be enjoyable.

Paul also wrote, “No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (l Corinthians 2:9).

John, Jesus’ disciple, wrote, “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Another New Testament writer encourages us to “fix our eyes on Jesus…who, for the joy set before him endured the cross…and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Eternal life with God will be joy that defies description and exceeds our imagination.

Life after death will be eternal.

It will never end. Have you ever watched a movie so good you wished it would never end?

Have you ever savored a dessert so sweet, you wished it would last and last? Have you ever had a relationship so fulfilling you hoped it would go on forever? Eternal life will be that good, and better! It will never end. “God has given us eternal life,” wrote John, “and this life is in His Son” (l John 5:11).

Jesus taught that eternal life involves all of the positive and none of the negative. God loves us and desires only the best for us now and in eternity.

How sad that some people don’t take advantage of all He has provided.

DON’T STOP!

Chattanooga cardiologist Maurice Rawlings, M.D., tells of a patient who had a cardiac arrest in Dr. Rawlings’ office. Throughout the attempted resuscitation, the patient faded in and out. Each time the doctor interrupted the heart massage, the patient appeared to die again.

When the man came to, he screamed, “I am in hell!” A look of sheer terror clouded his face. “Don’t stop!” he begged. “Don’t you understand? I am in hell. Each time you quit I go back to hell! Don’t let me go back to hell!” The patient survived and put his faith in Christ to take away his sins and secure his place in heaven.{8} The place the Bible calls hell, or hades, is the current home of those who do not accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness. It is a place of constant, conscious torment.{9} Hades is not the final dwelling place of those who die without a personal relationship with Christ. John says these will be judged at the “great white throne” judgment. Since no one’s deeds are sufficient to earn eternal life, those without Christ’s pardon will be cast into the “lake of fire.”{10} Jesus said that “the eternal fire…has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Not a pleasant subject. But remember, God does not want you to perish in hell. He loves you and wants you to spend eternity with Him. Not without Him.{11} Paul wrote that God our Savior wants all people to be saved (or made safe from the consequences of sin, which is separation from God). He wants us to know Him because He is truth.{12} God sent Jesus Christ, His Son, to pay the penalty for our sins (attitudes and actions that fall short of God’s perfection). Jesus literally went through hell for us. We simply need to receive His free gift of forgiveness—we can never earn it—to be guaranteed eternal life. “Whoever hears my word, Jesus says, “and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John

5:24).

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

According to the latest figures, the death rate in this country is still 100 percent. Every day on this planet about 140,000 people die.

What most of us are interested in is not “What happens to people when they die?” but “What will happen to me when I die?”

Some seek to avoid the issue of death or to insulate themselves from concern through popularity, possessions, pursuits, or power. Many feel that whatever belief makes you feel comfortable is OK. Do any of these descriptions fit you?

A nightclub near Cincinnati was packed one evening. Suddenly a busboy stepped onto the stage, interrupted the program, and announced that the building was on fire. Perhaps because they saw no smoke, many of the guests remained seated. Maybe they thought it was a joke, a part of the show. When they finally saw the smoke, it was too late. More than 150 people died as the nightclub burned.

As you consider death, are you believing what you want to believe or what the evidence shows is true? Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25).

Place your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you, too, will live even if you die.

Notes

1. Adapted from Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. 21-22.
2. For a more complete discussion, see the book from which this article is adapted: Rusty Wright, *The Other Side of Life*

(Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 1979, 1994).
3. See, for example, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).
4. Hebrews 1:14.
5. Hebrews 2:16.
6. 2 Samuel 12:23.
7. Matthew 17:14.
8. Maurice Rawlings, M.D., *Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), pp. 19-20.
9. Luke 16:23-24.
10. Revelatlon 20:11-15.
11. John 3:16.
12. I Timothy 2:3-4

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Why Care about Theology?

What is your response when you hear the word *theology*? Some people tend to cringe and think that such a word is of use only to the seminary student or, at the most, their pastor. Have you given much thought to how this word may apply to your life? If so, please continue your pursuit by thinking along with us. If not, we hope to encourage you to begin to take theology a little more seriously than you may have before.

Just what is theology? Literally, it is derived from a combination of two Greek terms meaning "a word about God." Eventually it was employed to refer not only to a study of the nature and attributes of God, but to the whole range of Christian doctrine. Augustus H. Strong, a theologian of the early twentieth century, offered a definition that is even

broader. He wrote, “Theology is the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”(1) So theology is concerned with a very wide range of subjects, such as the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, salvation, angels, the church, and the end times. Or, we can even say our theology pertains to all of life.

Sound theology is very important in the life of a Christian. History shows us this has always been true. From heresies in the very early church, through the upheaval of the Reformation, to the “Jesus Seminar” of more recent times, Christians have been challenged to give serious attention to matters of theology. And there are important reasons for each of us to devote increased attention to it at this time in history. Historic orthodox theology is currently being questioned, if not attacked, from both outside and inside our churches and institutions. Several examples will demonstrate this.

Contemporary Illustrations

A few years ago an infamous movie entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ* drew national and international attention because of its blasphemous caricature of Christ. The non-orthodox reports of the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of various scholars, have received the attention of both theological journals and popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. The conjectures of New Age advocates such as Shirley MacLaine include heretical views of God, Christ, and other facets of theology. Process theologians, who teach at many seminaries, teach a doctrine of God that includes the idea that “the world can be thought of as the body of God,” and the notion of a changing God who is as dependent on the world as the world is on Him.(2) Recent books from within evangelical circles include titles such as *The Openness of God*, which “asserts that such classical doctrines as God’s immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge demand reconsideration.”(3) More orthodox

evangelical writers have written such books as *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*? Obviously, the title indicates that the author is concerned about what he believes is a collapse of theology.(4) *The Body*, a book by Charles Colson, decries what Colson sees as a drift to a consumer-oriented church that, among other things, isn't concerned about matters of theological truth(5).

Such illustrations serve to alert us to the need for more theological reflection, not less. These are challenging times for theology!

Who Are the Theologians?

Do you know anyone who can be called a theologian? You probably immediately begin to think of a seminary professor or an erudite pastor you may know. But is it possible *you* can be called a theologian? If someone were to ask you what you believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and many other doctrines, chances are you would answer their questions. Thus you are stating your theology; you are, at some level, a theologian. There are certainly "professional" theologians who spend their lives thinking about and teaching theology, but theology is not just for schools and seminaries; it is for life. It is for you and every other member of Christ's body, the church.

In the fairly recent past in this country theology was spoken of in both the academy and the church. David Wells, a contemporary professional theologian who is concerned about recapturing such unity, has written that at one time theology encompassed three essential elements: "(1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements."(6) "Confession, in this understanding, is what the Church believes. It is what crystallizes into doctrine." Thus we are to confess our theology based on the inspired Word of God, the Bible. Then we are to wrestle intellectually with

what it means to hold such theology in the present world. Finally, we are to wisely apply the truth found in the first two steps.(8) It appears that too often such steps are lacking among all but a few contemporary Christians.

For more than two years my wife and I visited worship services at many churches in the Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas metroplex, which some refer to as a major part of the “Bible belt.” The churches represent a wide spectrum of denominational affiliations, and some are non-denominational. Our visits left us with many impressions, some of which are very positive. But one of several concerns is that too many of these churches emphasized appeasement rather than proclamation. That is, there was concern for relating to the “seeker” at the expense of teaching the believer; or there was an emphasis on “how to” sermons that contained little doctrinal substance; or there was stress on what is called contemporary Christian music coupled with lyrics that were often void of meaning; or there were statements of trite cliches that can do little, if anything, to lead the church to maturity. In other words, much was done to appease the “wants” of the people and little was done that would give the impression that theology is important in these churches.

On the other hand, those few churches that were the exceptions to such emphases boldly stated theological truth and genuinely worshipped God in the process. Their praise had meaning; their prayers were directed to the holy and sovereign God; their sermons contained truth that encouraged the church toward maturity; and even though individual “wants” were not stressed, true needs were met because theology for all of life had been proclaimed.

Which of these accounts is descriptive of your church? Does your church summon you to theological maturity? Or are you caught in a web of appeasement? The writer of Hebrews implored his readers to “press on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). May God help us do the same!

Theology in the World

A 1994 *U.S.News & World Report* poll of religious beliefs in the U.S. indicates that "about 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit, and about 60 percent say they attend religious services regularly."(9) In addition, "more than 80 percent, including 71 percent of college graduates, believe the Bible is the inspired word of God."(10) And "68 percent of Americans are members of a church or synagogue."(11) But do such statistics mean that sound theology plays a significant part in our lives? For example, could it be "that the surprising growth of church membership rolls in recent decades may signify the ascendancy of shallower, less demanding forms of religion with wider appeal?"(12) We believe the answer to this question is, "Yes!" It appears that too many Christians are unwilling to face the demands of theological thinking, and shallowness is the result. Good theology requires contemplation, study, and even debate. It is demanding, and it is certainly not shallow.

Since we are living in a culture that believes "anything goes," distinctive statements concerning our theology are increasingly necessary. Most people are willing to accept you as a Christian if your beliefs (i.e., your theology) are not narrow. If you are willing, for example, to state that Christianity is one of many legitimate paths to salvation, you will be accepted. But if you state that the gospel is the only path to salvation, you may be labeled as a narrow-minded bigot. Although a large majority of the people in this country claim to be religious, a large portion of that majority is still thinking within a relativistic worldview that attempts to reject absolutes. The exclusive claims of Christianity don't fit within such a worldview.

This was brought out clearly for me during an open forum in the lobby of a dormitory on a large state university campus. For more than two hours one of my colleagues and I attempted

to answer questions concerning Christianity from approximately a hundred college students. Their questions led us in many directions. We discussed social, political, apologetic, and many other issues. But the subject that disturbed them most was salvation through Jesus Christ. When I declared that Jesus was the only way to God, many of the students expressed their strong disagreement and even anger. One student was indignant because he realized that my statement concerning Christ logically meant that his belief in an American Indian deity was wrong. Even some Christian students were uncomfortable with my assertion. They had an uneasiness about it because it seemed to be too intolerant. Thus I had to quickly remind them that Christ himself said He is the only way to God. I was not making a claim about Christ; I was simply telling them what He said about himself.

Those Christian students are indicative of the need for more demanding thought concerning theology. To claim to be a Christian and at the same time be immersed in the shallow pond of theological tolerance is antithetical. Perhaps the non-Christian students have an excuse; they don’t know better. But the Christian students should know better; they need training in theology. And the same is true for all of us.

An Example of the Need

People continue to seek Jesus. But which Jesus? Is it the Jesus who was born of a virgin, who performed awesome miracles, who claimed to be God, who died on a cross for our sins, who rose from the dead, who ascended into heaven, who said He would return? Or is it the Jesus who died as a disillusioned revolutionary peasant? Or is it the Jesus who was a great religious teacher on a par with Buddha?

All these questions are very old, but at the same time they are very contemporary. And they indicate that theology, in this case the theology of Christ, continues to be important. As Christians, we are still challenged to think theologically.

Long-held, foundational, orthodox theology is being contested, not just within academia, but in more public venues. Let's consider a prominent example.

In 1991 a book was published by the title of *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.(13) John Dominic Crossan, the author, then published a second book in 1994 entitled, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.(14) Then the third book in his trilogy about Jesus, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images*,(15) was also published in 1994. Such titles are filled with indications that Crossan is anything but a believer in an orthodox doctrine of Christ. Jesus may have been a Mediterranean Jewish peasant, but was He something much more? The second title indicates that the author believes there is need for a new biography of Jesus, so he has provided it. And the third title boldly asserts that the "original sayings" of Jesus have been isolated from all other sayings so that we can discover the "essential" Jesus.

I have brought Crossan and his books to our attention because he is a prominent member of what is called the Jesus Seminar. This much-publicized seminar is composed of scholars who "used to meet regularly to discuss and vote on the originality of Jesus' sayings (198592) and are now evaluating his actions and deeds in a similar manner."(16)

Crossan's view of Jesus is exposed in a meandering passage that follows his perspective of the surrounding Roman Empire in which Jesus lived. He writes:

> *Jesus lived, against the systemic injustice and structural evil of that situation, an alternative open to all who would accept it: a life of open healing and shared eating, of radical itinerancy, programmatic homelessness, and fundamental egalitarianism, of human contact with discrimination, and of divine contact without hierarchy. He also died for that alternative. That is my understanding of what Jesus' words and deeds were all about.(17)*

Please note that Crossan has painted a picture of Jesus as a revolutionary whose primary concern was with things of this life. In fact his last phrase, “divine contact without hierarchy” (a confusing idea), is as close as he comes to stating that Jesus was anything more than a political radical. There is no mention of Jesus as the sacrificial Savior who takes away sin and gives eternal life.

In light of the fact that such perspectives are in vogue, and in light of the fact that they are taught to future pastors and professors, can we afford to leave theology in the back rooms of our minds?

Practical Theology

A recent book asserts that God “learns something from what transpires” in this world. The same text also asserts that “God comes to know events as they take place,” and that we should see God “as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world.”(18)

What is your reaction to such statements? If you have a reaction at all, you are to be commended. You are thinking theologically. As was true with me, your doctrine of God may have been challenged, and you may want to ask the author various questions. Those questions would probably have a lot to do with how you perceive God in your daily life. For example, you may want to ask if God is somehow dependent on you. If so, in what way?

Such thoughts demonstrate that theology is practical. If we stop a few minutes and concentrate, it is not difficult to see that our theology affects us, whether we are conscious of it or not. Let’s consider a few questions that can lead us to see how this is true.

1. If God used His awesome imagination to create the universe out of nothing, what is implied when the Bible states that humans are made in His image?

We can also use our God-given imaginations to create, not out of nothing, but out of what God supplied.

2. Is the Holy Spirit a person or a thing?

The Holy Spirit is a person within the godhead, the triunity. As a person, He interacts with us daily, and we can be filled with “Him,” not “it.”

3. If I accept Christ’s sacrificial death for me, can my salvation be taken away?

No! “You have been saved” (Eph. 2:8) for eternity. You are secure as a member of God’s family.

4. Was Jesus literally resurrected from the dead?

Yes! He has conquered death for us. “Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

5. What is man’s nature?

Man is made in God’s image. But his image has been marred; thus our very nature inclines us to sin. Yet, though our genes, society, and other factors may influence us to sin, God holds us personally responsible to accept or reject His gracious offer of sin’s remedy in Christ.

6. Do angels really exist?
   Yes! Evil angels are in league with Satan and are actively opposed to God's purposes. Good angels are doing the bidding of God in the spiritual realm. Both evil and good angels can serve to remind us that there is both a physical and a spiritual dimension.

7. Is the church a building?
   No! The church is the redeemed people of God, of all the ages, living and dead; the church is also called the "body of Christ." As such it is a living, dynamic carrier of the grace and power of God.

8. Is Jesus returning in power and authority for His church?
   Yes! The truth of this brings security and hope in the midst of a troubled world.

In a cursory way these questions have touched the major categories of theology. It is our hope that you will study such categories seriously. What you believe about them is important to you and those who follow after you. Theology matters!

Notes

1. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1907), 1.
2. Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 23-25.

3. Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), cover notes.
4. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).
5. Charles Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992).
6. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 98.
7. Ibid., 99-100.
8. Ibid.
9. Jeffery L. Sheler, "Spiritual America," *U.S.News & World Report* (4 April 1994), 50.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
14. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
15. John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
16. Ibid., 22.
17. Ibid., 12.
18. Richard Rice, in *The Openness of God*, 16.

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