

# Current Events and the Currency of Truth: “Test Everything”

*Byron Barlowe opens a series on biblical discernment for dark days, likening wise discernment of current events and abiding issues to examining bills and coins to verify their authenticity. Being able to tell the difference between good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, fruitful vs. unfruitful, and subtle lies that captivate believers is a long-term discipline that is a Christian's duty and privilege to walk out as God provides Scripture, counsel, reflection, and field experience.*

***“In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” Colossians 2:3***

As Christians, should we really concern ourselves with discerning real vs. fake, better vs. best, profitable vs. unprofitable, lies and half-truths vs. truth and wisdom? To help answer that question, and as an introduction to a coming series on discernment, let's look at a historical example from over 70 years ago.

Adolph Burger, a Jewish printer sentenced to a Nazi concentration camp in 1942, was shocked to find himself released and forced to use his printing skill for Germany's war effort. In a perversion of the tabernacle artisans whom God gifted during Israel's exodus from Egypt, [\[1\]](#) Burger was forced to facilitate a brilliant secret plan to ruin Britain.

His and fellow Jewish craftsmen's work would be dropped by German bombers over English cities and towns. But these were no explosive devices. They potentially held much more devastating power than any number of bombs. They were even made of paper!

Fifty-five years later, investigative TV show *60 Minutes II* hired a deep-sea recovery team to search the 350-foot depths of Lake Toplitz in Austria. Why? In the final days of WWII, when the Russians and Allied troops were pinching Hitler's regime from opposite sides for an inevitable victory, some Nazi holdouts hoped the diabolical plan could yet be implemented. So, they sunk the work of the Jewish artisans in remote Lake Toplitz.

The plan, dubbed *Operation Bernard*, would seize upon human greed and sheer numbers to ruin the British economy. It would go like this:

- Drop exquisitely forged English pound notes from Luftwaffe planes causing widespread distribution, then refuse to honor the phony money by banks and businesses, and resultant economic panic among citizens, thus
- Radically undermining the value of the British pound, hence
- Destroying the economy, hopefully driving England to its knees and ensuring victory.
- Key to the plan: human nature. Money falling from the sky is just too tempting! It would definitely lead to hoarding and general circulation, they thought.

Most forgers do as little as they can to mimic genuine currency—only enough to get a pass on a cursory look. “But by using the world’s finest craftsmen and supplying . . . the most modern tools and machinery, the Germans solved this problem . . . . Once the bills were in circulation, it would be difficult for even experts to know genuine from counterfeit; amateurs would have no hope.”[\[2\]](#)

Judging counterfeit claims and deceit, like the bogus bills the Nazis created, is a complex project, requiring great skill and training. Much of godly discernment emerges from self-discipline, a facet of the fruit of the Spirit. According to Tim Challies, author of *The Discipline of Spiritual*

*Discernment*, every disciple of Jesus is morally obligated to discern between truth and lies and to pass on the former while resisting the latter.

Whatever the person's level of maturity in Christ, wisdom and its application of discernment to specific issues is available for every Christian. "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the *knowledge* of him who called us . . ." (1 Peter 1:3-4, emphasis mine). "Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten" (1 Corinthians 2:6 NLT). All born-again believers possess potential discernment. Mature ones seek and develop it.

The biblical command to "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) means carefully weighing inputs from culture, family, and even personal thoughts. It monitors—somewhat like antivirus software on a computer—our beliefs and decision-making in light of Scriptural truth, Spirit-illuminated meditation and thoughtfulness, godly counsel, and experience in situational discernment.

Gaining wisdom, the entire point of the book of Proverbs, is life-giving and sweet! "Know also that wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 24:14).

Often this lifelong process seems burdensome, but spiritual warfare is indeed warfighting, which is often excruciating. The Body of Christ has always been in a *war of ideas*, battling for truth. However daunting, constant discipline and practice takes over and knowledge grows into wisdom which, by God's grace, produces discernment. Discernment becomes a progression not unlike basic education from kindergarten to secondary graduation. The seasoned soldier of Truth can see potential danger approaching and react with muscle memory, but not prematurely or with overkill. Better weapons in trained hands

win.{3}

Lies, subtle and blatant, emerge daily on every front like perhaps never in our history. Brazenly hostile and self-contradicting misinformation and propaganda avalanches too quickly to keep up with.

Renowned Christian philosopher Dr. J.P. Moreland insists that “the fundamental fight today is not primarily about truth claims” themselves but rather how we can know truth at all. The prevailing assumptions question the very “nature of knowledge itself.”{4} People say, “How can you know that?” or simply dismiss Christian faith statements and reasoned, Scriptural argumentation as groundless, mostly due to their faith in scientific naturalism as the only source of actual truth.{5} Postmodernism creates a widespread belief that truth can only be tribal, eschewing appeals to absolute or universal truth claims—chiefly, the metanarrative of the Biblical record.{6}

This moment in American history is witnessing pervasive efforts to deceive and shut down alternative views. Pressure groups, several with Marxist underpinnings, actively initiate strategies designed to dismantle and remake American culture, its history and education system, the nuclear family, negotiated policy creation, America’s founding principles, the role of the press, and to suppress individuals and groups who do not hew to certain views. Some big businesses, “woke” and supportive of such moves, provide financial, advertising, and distribution aid as de facto gatekeepers and worse.

Thanks to federal law granting them special protections, social media platforms and search engines (Big Tech) are uniquely free, compared to broadcast radio and TV, to blacklist and block anyone with whom they disagree. It’s a matter of public record that Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others exercise these tactics of massive influence more each week. Industry leaders who skew Leftward politically have

bound together to influence the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election.[{7}](#) Calls from members of Congress unconstitutionally imply, even threaten, to “research” individuals who were associated at all with the former president or the movement he represented. Understanding the roots of radical notions like these helps recognize and rebut them.

This seems to be our generation’s time of testing. But, as Jesus taught, believers don’t target even our human enemies.[{8}](#) Rather, “we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We fight for their sake and ours against destructive lies. During dark days, such a keen battle-ready mindset and *heartset* seems all the more urgent.

## **What’s Our Part in Deciphering Truth in All This Chaos?**

Did you know that you can refuse a suspicious piece of currency? But if you accept it, you’re legally responsible. If it’s funny money, you’re left holding the bag.

The Bank of Canada’s solution to a rampant counterfeiting problem was a campaign drumming into the public the watchwords: “touch, tilt, look at, look through.” That publicity campaign taught citizens how to test official currency compared to forgeries. Likewise, Christ followers must hold up any claim or trend to the light to see if it’s genuine truth or a fake. On religious claims and trends, examine carefully any doctrine or teaching or you could be led astray.[{9}](#)

Therefore, if legal tender requires examination and the recipient is legally responsible for analyzing all received cash payment, then certainly Paul’s admonition to “examine everything”[{10}](#) applies even more to citizens of God’s

kingdom. We will answer for our spiritual savvy, our *saltmanship*, and our lighting of the world, as well as how wisely we led our families, fellows and flocks.

Everyday life examples of the need for vigilant discernment are replete. Recently I was digitally fed news from an online newspaper I found valuable. After a quick search I discovered that this newspaper is owned by a mystical religious cult founded in China. I found out through reporting sources I didn't fully trust, though, so I provisionally entered that new fact into my matrix of personal filters. Only recently was that claim confirmed when I saw the name of the religious group spelled out on the publication's web site.

The point of the story: few things are jet black and snow white, so layers of discernment are required. When things get gray, more work is needed with the help of others. Wise discernment discovers distinctions within the knowledge we gain, it assesses known patterns, and advises the heart and mind on levels of trust to agree to or the need to reject.

In the case mentioned, I determined that the enemy of my enemy (the Chinese Communist Party) is my friend, in a way. However, I have an eye out on journalistic balance and am especially on guard reading their newspaper's spirituality section (if I ever read it). All of this took a grand total of less than fifteen minutes, then an abiding mindfulness as I hunted for other things. Awareness and practice are key. Biblical and cultural perception paves the way. Make your own wise assessments.

You, as a growing or seasoned Christian, can use wise discernment to serve as an "elder in the gate" for others. Or, as a seeker you can begin to plumb the depths of God's twin revelations in Creation and the Bible. The book of Proverbs emphasizes a desperate and greatly rewarding pursuit of wisdom and its seasoning with age. We are here to help equip you and answer your questions.[{11}](#)

The best antidote to spiritual and worldly confusion is simply Holy Spirit-led discernment. (And that's not just for those gifted with special discernment.)

In future posts I will address several angles on discernment in the world and Church. Following is a list of upcoming topics as I envision them today.

### ***Upcoming in This Discernment Series***

**The How of Discernment**—I'll dive deeper into biblically defining discernment and address how worldview as a concept helps reveal and classify untrue and dangerous assumptions among philosophies that affect one's view of the universe and the Creator, human value and business, and more. Also, to be discussed: How can we distinguish true from untrue (or the insidious half-true), good, better and best, and right from wrong or disputable matters of conscience? What is the relationship of knowledge, wisdom, and discernment as the Bible frames it?

**Spiritual & Mental Triage**—How can I handle sustained, varying and rapid information, claims and counterclaims, and policies that force me to either endure, protest, or free myself from them? (I may write some about conscientious objection vs. following authorities.) How can one fend off attack, especially the arrows aimed at religious freedom, biblical values and God's revealed will? What if repression or persecution happens anyway?

**Distinguishing Between God's Ways and God's Enemy's Ways**—It bears emphasizing that, though the cosmos (world) and human sin nature (flesh) are capable of ruin on a global scale, there's a cosmic battle pre-dating man and Creation—and, yes, politics. The traits and track records, if you will, of both God Almighty and the original Rebel help to immediately test a message's likely origin and flag the source.

**Discerning and Dealing with False Dichotomies**—With so many

events and “empty philosophies of men,”<sup>{12}</sup> the unified biblical narrative of how life works and biblical guidance gets distorted by oversimplified false choices—a favorite trick of the Liar and his worldly, often unwitting, disciples. It’s either “material things are all that matters” or “spiritual and mystical things are the only really real things,” etc. Competing goods are confusing for good-willed people, too. How do I better notice these and find either a middle way or a third way? What false *splits* have I bought into that keep both unbelievers and believers from discerning biblically: facts vs. feelings, truth vs. emotions, oppressors vs. the oppressed only, and so on?

**Giving Essentials Their Proper Due**—How do I and those I spiritually lead avoid unconsciously discounting a high view of Scripture, theology, and God? We not only need to elevate our game but lift our eyes to the heavens.

**Realize and Embrace the Need for Testing**—Even the scariest of crises, such as an epidemic or a cultural revolution, may constitute a test God uses for us. Such events provide a perfect laboratory for gaining discernment from general knowledge and a growing understanding gained by “rightly handling the word of truth.”<sup>{13}</sup> The disciplines you hone through a sincerely perseverant search for a divine source of wisdom gains immediate insight for daily situations, news, and cultural developments that touch your life.

**Discernment and the Human Heart, Mind and Will**—What did Solomon receive after asking for discernment to govern God’s people, and how does that apply to me? Did that guarantee wise living? What’s the difference between the heart and head in biblical and scientific terms? What does Scripture say about the heart and how elevated is its role?

**Are You and Your Sources Asking the Hard Questions?**—Yesterday’s conspiracy theory increasingly becomes today’s headline and tomorrow’s policy. Did you detect a

curious new spirit of control, perhaps a taste by governments for unreasonable and unrelenting regulations in the initial stages of the Covid-19 response? [I did in March 2020.](#) Skilled observers like Dennis Prager asked early on about the balance of our national response. Discerning people were justified in their caution and predictions about the tradeoffs between several goods: fighting a novel virus for everyone weighed against economic, medical, and psychological damage, not to mention governments' tendency to retain emergency measures beyond need. Asking the hard questions can enable us to see and respond to the shifts and movements around us from whichever side. Asking early enough can avoid hazards.

**Avoiding Logical Pitfalls and Inappropriate Judgment**—Thinking can be flawed or downright incorrect, so how can I avoid that? What are some common logical fallacies and how can I spot them? Are sound arguments always true?

**Judging: Is it a Forbidden Act or a Necessary Tool?**—One of the most famous but misused quotes of Jesus is, “Judge not, lest you be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Was He teaching never to make assessments of anyone or anything, or did His and other New Testament teachings offer a nuanced approach?

Discernment must stem foundationally from an outside Observer or its interpretations will be captive to its own small circle of knowledge, assumptions, and influencers. Think of it! God intervened in human form and keeps speaking into it by his illuminating Spirit. “But the one who is spiritual discerns all things . . . .” (1 Corinthians 2:15).

As ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors, we speak his truth as if from a foreign country.[{14}](#) How do we gain a hearing? Partly from making sense of things from an objective, authoritative, out-of-this-world point of view, relying on knowledge and wisdom that the unredeemed can only dream exist.

**Notes**

1. Exodus 36:1.
2. Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books 2007), 14. I owe this well-researched story and many concepts to Challies.
3. 2 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Timothy 4:8; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12
4. Dr. J.P. Moreland, on a Zoom conference call sponsored by Baylor University apologetics club Oso Logos (tied to Ratio Christi), streamed live on March 2, 2021. I attended that online meeting.
5. See [probe.org/atheist-myths-and-scientism/](https://probe.org/atheist-myths-and-scientism/). Note: this belief sneaks into the minds and convictions of Christians, too, who don't see its influence.
6. See [probe.org/worldviews-part-2/](https://probe.org/worldviews-part-2/) and [probe.org/truth-what-it-is-and-why-we-can-know-it/](https://probe.org/truth-what-it-is-and-why-we-can-know-it/).
7. See a mainstream media article detailing a “conspiracy” to “save the [2021 Presidential] election” through a “shadow campaign” led by a “cabal” of Big Tech leaders at [time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/](https://time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/). See also an expose (speech transcript) detailing very recent and alarming systematic message controlling methods by giant social media platforms: [imprimis.hillsdale.edu/control-need-rein-big-tech/](https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/control-need-rein-big-tech/).
8. “Love your enemies . . .”, Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 12:31.
9. Acts 17:11. More to come on general as well as spiritual discernment to via [Probe.org](https://probe.org), Probe radio and our [Head & Heart podcast](#).
10. 1 Thessalonians 5:21.
11. Visit our answers to visitor queries at [Probe.org/answers/](https://probe.org/answers/) and [Ask Probe](#).
12. Galatians 2:8.
13. 2 Timothy 2:15.
14. Hebrews 11:16.

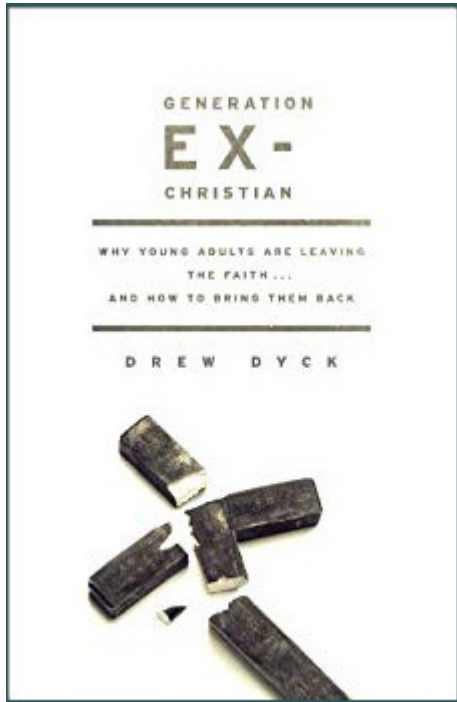
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# Ex-Christians: Ways to Bring Back the Leavers

*Steve Cable provides an overview of why young people leave the church based on Drew Dyck's book Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back.*



Over the last several years, Probe has been reporting on a changing young adult society that is marginalizing the church at an increasing rate. When we analyzed relevant survey data and our own survey taken of 18- to 40-year-old, born again Christians, the data revealed that even among Evangelicals, cultural captivity was the norm for the vast majority of Christians. One result of culturally captive Christians is that their children often become “leavers,” leaving the faith entirely once they are out on their own.



Are there others who are seeing the same degree of disconnect with the truths of Scripture in the life styles and life choices of young, adult Americans? I want to look at one such prominent voice speaking out about these same concerns. Drew Dyck is the author of *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back*<sup>[1]</sup> and managing editor of *Leadership Journal*.

## Six Types of Leavers

Dyck's book is not primarily driven by general survey data. Instead, it tells a more personal story. He connected with people who had left their Christian upbringing. He talked with them about their life choices *and* he attempted to share Christ in a way that would be meaningful in the context of their personal journeys. As a result of this experience, he felt that those leaving their Christian influenced youth to enter into adulthood without a total faith in Christ could be placed into one of six different categories. He entitled these categories:

- Postmodern leavers – those adopting a postmodern view where no meta-narrative is to be trusted
- Modern leavers – those who believe only what they can prove and Neo-Darwinism seems more provable
- Neo-pagan leavers – those who gravitate to an earth-based religion where they are essentially their own gods
- Rebel leavers – those for whom a sinful lifestyle appears more appealing or who don't want to "give in" to God

- Recoilers – leavers who withdraw because of an emotional hurt associated with people claiming to represent Christianity, and
- Drifters – perhaps the largest group of leavers who gradually drift away because their faith was never that deep to begin with.

Each category of leaver creates a different challenge for one who desires to lead them into a true knowledge of Jesus. Just as Paul used different approaches to share the gospel in the synagogue, the marketplace and the philosopher's meeting place in Athens, so we need to tailor our approach to communicate effectively with our audience. In what follows, we will consider each of these categories and some of the ways one can best share with them.

## Postmodern and Modern Leavers

Postmodern thinking is becoming the cultural norm for young adults. The postmodern view holds that there is no objective truth applying to all, but rather each person or group of people defines their own truth. As J. P. Moreland puts it, "In a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective truth, reality, value, reason and so forth."<sup>{2}</sup> Yet, many young adults still adopt modernity, the dominant view throughout the twentieth century. Those with a modern view believe linear thinking and rational thought can lead us to objective truths valid for all. In his book *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck finds both of these viewpoints create stumbling blocks for belief.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is true for all people in every age. This view runs counter to the "true for you but not for me" mentality of the postmodern generation. Many young adults influenced by postmodern thought have a difficult time accepting the all-encompassing, meta-narrative of the gospel. These leavers believe that Christianity is too narrow and

judgmental to be a part of their own truth sphere.

Dyck points out that those with a postmodern perspective are not really interested in hearing your apologetic arguments. Even if you weave a compelling logical argument, they will nod, smile, and ignore you. They need to see the impact of the truth of Jesus lived out in your life before them. Invite them to participate with you in serving others, creating an opportunity to share your story. They are, initially, more interested in your personal story. How has Jesus Christ made a difference in your life?

Conversely, those with a modern perspective are not as interested in your personal story. With moderns, ask questions to understand how they decide if something is true. Model a concern for the truth before laying “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” on their plate. Focus on the truth of the gospel, not letting ourselves get sidetracked into other arenas. How satisfying is their alternative view, and what are the consequences if they are wrong in their perception of truth?

Many modernists report that most Christians hastened their departure from the church through trite, unhelpful answers to the questions they were asking. Be willing to do the research to answer their questions thoughtfully and with confidence. Remember, there are good cogent explanations to their questions and their objections.

As Dyck discovered, effectively sharing with a leaver today requires us to know whether their general thought process is more shaped by modernism or postmodernism. Their answer determines whether we start with our personal experience or with the total truth of the gospel.

## **Neo-Pagans and Rebels**

Two more groups of leavers Dyck labels Neo-pagans and Rebels.

Dyck discovered a surprisingly large number of Neo-pagan leavers. Neo-pagans have gravitated to the beliefs that they are ultimately gods living in a society where the earth is to be nourished and women are as important, if not more so, than men. One common example of this religious view is Wicca.[{3}](#) Another example is Oprah's mishmash of Eastern mysticism.[{4}](#)

As with other leavers, begin by asking them questions to understand what they believe and what attracted them to it. With Neo-pagans, Dyck suggests starting by sharing with them our appreciation for nature and our sense of responsibility to care for it as God commanded. We also can share the honor that Christ and the church gave to women. They need to understand that women are "fellow heirs," not maidservants in Christ's kingdom. Upon earning a listening ear, we can share how we have experienced God's presence in our midst. Share our spiritual experiences with them. Above all, recognize that you are engaging in a spiritual battle that must include fervent pray on their behalf.

As he examined his relationships with different types of leavers, Dyck realized that some of them leave not to follow after a different belief system but, instead, to rebel against their view of a creator who is attempting to limit their self expression. Some rebels are motivated by a desire to do their own thing and participate fully in the short-lived pleasures of this world. Others are motivated by a desire to spit in the face of God, declaring their independence.

To effectively reach out to spiritual rebels, we need to let them know we care about them as persons. The world is already showing them that in their rebellion they are not really free. Everybody serves something. Get them to talk about what they are serving, whether it is money, success, clothes, power, etc. Then share with them how you experience true freedom as a captive of the source of all true freedom, Jesus Christ. As Paul tells us in Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the

flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

## **Drifters and Recoilers**

Drifters and Recoilers are two more kinds of leavers.

Dyck identifies the Drifters as the largest group of leavers, exhibiting “that entrenched human defect—the tendency to drift from God.”<sup>{5}</sup> They did not set out to walk away from the faith of their parents. Over time it became less important to them, until it played no real role in their lives. As Dyck put it, “the biggest danger to Christianity is Christians.”<sup>{6}</sup>

Recent surveys showed 18- to 29-year-olds who indicated they had no religion growing from 11 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2008.<sup>{7}</sup> Of these young adults, two-thirds of them were leavers from an earlier point in their life where they considered themselves Christians. Their most common reason for leaving was not some intellectual epiphany, but rather they “just gradually drifted away from the religion.”<sup>{8}</sup>

Drifters are not driven by specific intellectual objections. They may have no real objections or arguments against Christian beliefs. Instead, they are apathetic toward it. It just is not important in their life.

To reach Drifters, one must redefine their perception that a Christian life is not worth pursuing. They need to see us loving Jesus because of who He is and not because of what He can do for us. It is not about getting God to do something for us. It is about the opportunity for eternal fellowship with the One who created us all.

The Drifters need to be connected with older adults who are living with an eternal perspective. Who are “redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). We need to raise the bar on the Christian life. It is more than the sterile, play-acting game they may have seen from their parents. You

cannot call them back to a watered down Christianity that was unable to hold their allegiance in the first place. Instead, we need to live out before them the radical lifestyle of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

The final group of leavers are the ones Dyck calls the Recoilers. These people are a special case. Their lives have been marred by significant pain. They relate the source of this pain to their Christian experience. For the Recoilers, it is typically only in the context of a relationship that healing can take place. On the one hand, we need to empathize with them, while, on the other, they need to see the joy our faith brings to our lives. Gradually, we may be able to help them delineate between God who loves them and the people who hurt them.

## **Reaching This Generation**

In *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck identified six different types of faith leavers: Postmoderns, Moderns, Neo-pagans, Spiritual Rebels, Drifters, and Recoilers. Recognizing that we are called to be “all things to all men so that we may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22), we can tailor our approach to more effectively reach each type of leaver.

Let’s consider five aspects that need to be consistent regardless of which type of leaver you are dealing with.

*Listen to them to understand* which type they may be. If we jump into sharing without knowing, we run the risk they will tune us out permanently.

*Articulate why we believe what we believe.* We need to have a good basic understanding of why we believe the gospel is true. If we have a good grasp of the basics, we can tailor our approach to the type of leaver we are addressing.

*Enter into relationship with the long view in mind.* Don’t

expect to reverse their dismissal of Christianity overnight. Over time we want clear away some of the obstacles standing between them and a vibrant faith. Be prepared for this effort to take time.

*Focus on forging loving relationships.* All the intelligent words in the world won't matter if they view us as hired guns adding another notch to our tally. Paul reminded Timothy, "The aim of our instruction is love proceeding from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Demonstrating Christian love makes them more willing to sincerely listen to us.

*Consistently pray for the leavers in our lives.* As Dyck put it, "We can give our loved ones who have strayed no greater gift than time spent in the presence of God on their behalf. Plead, ramble, cry, rage—but don't stop." Pray that "God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ . . . that we may make it clear in the way we ought to speak" (Col. 4:2). If we are not bringing God into the relationship through prayer, we are not speaking with His effectiveness.

I don't believe the God who "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) would at the same time desire a large portion of our young adults to leave behind faith in Jesus Christ. We are not to throw up our hands in surrender, but rather to dedicate ourselves to sharing Christ in ways that communicate the truth to different sets of ears. Let's commit together to reach out and bring these leavers into an eternal relationship with Christ.

## **Notes**

1. Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back* (Moody Publishers, 2010), Kindle edition.
2. Ibid., Chapter 2.

3. See Michael Gleghorn, "Wicca: A Biblical Critique," Probe Ministries, 2002, [probe.org/wicca-a-biblical-critique/](http://probe.org/wicca-a-biblical-critique/).
4. See Steve Cable, "Oprah's Spirituality: Exploring A New Earth," Probe Ministries, 2008, [probe.org/oprahs-spirituality-exploring-a-new-earth/](http://probe.org/oprahs-spirituality-exploring-a-new-earth/).
5. Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, chapter 16.
6. Ibid.
7. Kosmin & Keysar, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, [commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES\\_08.pdf](http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf), "Highlights."
8. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.*, 2009, [www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux-Changes-in-Religious-Affiliation-in-the-US.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux-Changes-in-Religious-Affiliation-in-the-US.aspx)

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## The All-Powerful God

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines the important doctrine of the omnipotence of God, and what it means for God to be all-powerful.*

### Introducing Omnipotence

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would give birth to Israel's promised Messiah, she was stunned. After all, she was a virgin. How could she possibly give birth to a son? But the angel informed her that God's power was more than sufficient to accomplish such a thing, "for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37; NIV).



A foundational element of a Christian worldview is a proper view of God. This article is about God's omnipotence. Although the term may sound a bit intimidating, it simply means that God is all-powerful. A number of scriptural passages speak to this issue.

For example, through the prophet Jeremiah God warned the people of Judah that because of their wickedness their land would soon be conquered by the Babylonians (Jer. 32:26-35). Nevertheless, God also promised that he would one day restore his people to their land and bless them with great prosperity (Jer. 32:37-44). As if to make clear that the Lord was completely able to fulfill his promise, the context twice leads us to reflect upon the fact that nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17, 27). The text, therefore, seems to clearly indicate that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent.

This power is revealed in a number of different ways. For example, the creation of the universe reveals his "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus reveals his "mighty strength," which not only raised Christ from the dead, but which seated him at the right hand of God, "far above all . . . power and dominion" (Eph. 1:18-23). Finally, his might is also revealed in the gospel, which the apostle Paul described as "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

In fact, He is often referred to as God *Almighty*. In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders who are seated before the throne of God fall on their faces and worship the Lord declaring, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign" (Rev. 11:17).

The cumulative picture is indeed a grand one—and quite naturally leads to the believer’s affirmation that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But how is this attribute to be understood? What exactly does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? These are some of the questions with which we’ll grapple in the remainder of this article.

## Omnipotence and Creation

The Apostle’s Creed begins, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>{1}</sup> Not only does this statement affirm a central (and biblical) Christian truth-claim, namely, that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), it also clearly links this affirmation with God’s attribute of omnipotence by referring to him as “God the Father *almighty*.” By linking God’s omnipotence with creation in this way, the creed reaffirms what the Apostle Paul had previously taught in his letter to the Romans, that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen in what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

But why does the Bible, and Christian tradition, link God’s omnipotence with creation in this way? One of the most important reasons is to be found in the Christian doctrine of creation itself. You see, unlike certain pagan doctrines of creation, which taught that the universe was *formed* out of pre-existent matter, Christianity teaches that God *created* the universe out of nothing. And when we say that God created the universe “out of nothing,” we are claiming, as the theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, that the universe “is not created out of anything.” Rather, “it came into being through the absolute fiat of God’s Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into being.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin

of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”<sup>{3}</sup> Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.<sup>{4}</sup>

This is why omnipotence and creation are so closely linked in the Christian tradition. It’s one thing to merely *form* a universe out of pre-existent matter. It is another thing entirely to *create* a universe out of absolutely nothing! As Christian philosophers Paul Copan and Bill Craig observe, “It is difficult to imagine any more stunning display of God’s almighty power than the world’s springing into being out of nothing, at his mere command.”<sup>{5}</sup>

## Omnipotence and Morality

Now you might be thinking that if God is all-powerful, then he can do absolutely anything. But if we adopt this understanding of omnipotence, we quickly run into conflict with the teaching of Scripture, for Scripture tells us plainly that there are some things God cannot do.

For example, in Numbers 23:19 we read: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” According to this text, God is not the sort of being to tell a lie. When he makes a promise, we can be confident that he will keep it, because God does not lie (see also 1 Sam. 15:29 and Tit. 1:2).

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, “it is impossible for God

to lie” by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is “firm and secure” (Heb. 6:18-19).

But if we say that God cannot lie, or break a promise, or do anything else that is morally evil, then haven't we denied that God is all-powerful? Not necessarily. The vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the history of the church have consistently taught that God's omnipotence does not include the ability to do that which is logically impossible or contradictory.

Of course, there is no contradiction in saying that an omnipotent being can commit a morally evil act. But there does seem to be a contradiction in saying that a completely good, morally perfect being can perform such an act. As a morally perfect being, God not only has no moral faults, but as James reminds us, he cannot even be tempted by sin and evil (James 1:13). Hence, as one Christian philosopher observes, “for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what is impossible for that being to do.”<sup>[6]</sup> And clearly, the inability to do what is morally evil should not be seen as detracting from God's omnipotence. Instead, it should be viewed as exalting his moral perfection.

## Omnipotence and Freedom

We've seen that omnipotence cannot mean that God can do absolutely *anything*. For as a morally perfect being, God is incapable of doing what is morally evil. This might lead us to think that God can do anything that is consistent with his morally perfect nature. But most theologians would still reject such a view. They would insist that some things are just logically impossible and that it can't count against God's omnipotence to admit that he cannot do such things.

Let's consider an example. A square is a geometrical object

with four angles. A triangle has only three. This being so, what do you think the chances are of constructing a square triangle? Not very good, right? After all, if something has four angles, then it has more than three. And if it has only three angles, then it has less than four. Regardless of how much power one has, a square triangle is a *logical impossibility*.

With this in mind, let's now consider another example. Suppose that John is the kind of person who, if married, would *always* freely seek his wife's input before making any major financial decision. If this is true, then it would seem that not even God could create John, place him in such circumstances, and have him freely *refrain* from seeking his wife's input—for this is simply *not* what John would *freely* do in such circumstances.

Of course, God still has plenty of options. He could always refuse to create John, or refuse to let him get married, or refuse to let him be confronted with a major financial decision. Alternatively, God could put John in the circumstances we're considering, but *make* him decide not to seek his wife's input. But what he cannot do is place John in these circumstances and then *make* him *freely* decide not to seek his wife's input. For to *make* John *freely* do something is as logically impossible as creating a square triangle.[{7}](#)

Of course, God's inability to perform a logically impossible task can't fairly count against his omnipotence. For this would suggest "that a task has been specified, that transcends the capacities . . . of Omnipotence. But no task at all has been specified by uttering a self-contradictory . . . mixture of words."[{8}](#) So we needn't worry that we've abandoned the doctrine of omnipotence by admitting that God cannot perform meaningless tasks! We've simply clarified the meaning of omnipotence.

# The Importance of Omnipotence

The doctrine that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is, as one philosopher has observed, “not a bit of old metaphysical luggage that can be abandoned with relief.” Instead, it’s “indispensable for Christianity.” After all, God has made many wonderful promises to his people. But if he “were not almighty . . . he might . . . sincerely promise, but find fulfillment beyond his power.”<sup>{9}</sup> So only if God is omnipotent can we confidently bank on his promises. But this is a bit of a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the doctrine of God’s omnipotence can be very comforting for believers, who are rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. After all, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Whatever problems and difficulties we face in life, our omnipotent God has more than enough power to see us through. If he chooses, he can easily deliver us from fire or water, sword or famine, sickness or disease. And if he lets us go through such things, he can provide all the grace and strength we need to endure. While the suffering of God’s saints can indeed be great, we must also remember that this life is not the end of our story, for “in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:11). A promise our omnipotent God is more than able to fulfill!

On the other hand, however, an omnipotent Deity is a most frightening prospect for anyone who persists in spurning his love and grace. For as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we are each “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (9:27) and “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31)—especially when that God is all-powerful! It’s a sobering thought to remind ourselves that not one of us can ultimately escape God’s power and judgment. If we make the omnipotent God our enemy, then no one can

deliver us from his hand.

Thankfully, however, peace with God is available to anyone who wants it. The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He pleads with men to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). "Whoever is thirsty," he says, "let him come . . . let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17b). The omnipotent God offers us all good things in Christ—and nothing can prevent him making good on his offer!

## Notes

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# Glorious Morning Glories

This is what love looks like.

My husband planted morning glories for me on our back fence because they are my favorite.



I love that a whole new batch of brand new blooms pops out each morning, day after day of fresh beauty that reminds me of Lamentations 3:23, that God's mercies are "new every morning—great is Your faithfulness!"

This year, we had to wait long into the fall for the flowers. The green foliage was crazy lush and full for months, but there were no gorgeous "blue happies," as I think of them, until late October.

Finally they started exploding daily with beauty and color. Not long afterwards, an unseasonable cold snap hit us, and the green foliage started to wither and dry up.

But the "blue happies" kept popping out!



I had to smile at what was happening on our fence, because it was a powerful illustration of what it's like for me to grow older. The green leaves were getting old and spent and dry and yucky, at the same time that every morning, there were still fresh and new morning glory blooms sprouting out. What a picture of what has become my new life verse, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

Therefore we do not lose heart, but ***though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.*** For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

My body is growing older and weaker, especially ravaged by the lingering effects of polio. Not long ago, I spent almost two years [unable to walk](#) at all because of severe arthritis in both hips. (The Lord has restored so very much to me on the other side of two [hip replacements](#)!) I'm able to walk and stand without pain these days, for which I give thanks every single day, but the march of time continues and, like everyone else, I'm going downhill physically.

But—the glorious but!—on the inside I get to be fresh and new every day! Just like the “blue happies”! As I walk in faithfulness with the Lord, seeking to abide in Him and allow the beauty and character of Christlikeness to flow into and through me, He keeps bringing renewed energy and joy to my soul. Every day! I love it!

The hope for us as believers, especially older believers, is that we get to be renewed daily with the radiance and vibrancy and joy of Jesus within that keeps getting better and better the older we get!

In fact, the Bible even speaks about our transformation as a special kind of glory: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I LOVE being transformed, a little bit every day, into the image of Jesus, with ever-increasing glory! I get to be a spiritual morning glory!

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/glorious-morning-glories/](https://blogs.bible.org/glorious-morning-glories/) on December 15,  
2020.

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**Addressing                      Anxiety                      in**

# Tumultuous Times

*Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.*

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.[{1}](#) While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.[{2}](#) A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.[{3}](#) *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*



Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”[{4}](#)

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it’s happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*”<sup>{5}</sup> The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, we *significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we’ll explore this transformation.

## **Morphing Your Mind—It’s Mostly Up to You!**

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush

and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.”{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.”{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.”{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape.{9} This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design for renewing the mind.”{10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

## **Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude**

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old

survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.<sup>{11}</sup> “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.”<sup>{12}</sup> New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.”<sup>{13}</sup>

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.<sup>{14}</sup> As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation.”<sup>{15}</sup> We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what’s going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, “The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for

pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting.”[{16}](#) How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The “fight or flight” area actually shrinks in size.[{17}](#) It’s a real chill pill!

God keeps “him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”[{18}](#)

## **Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart**

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It’s a God-given right to pursue it, according to America’s founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—“steal, kill, and destroy”[{19}](#) our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, “You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety*. There really is hope.”[{20}](#) Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we’re not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].”[{21}](#)

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God’s help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”[{22}](#)

Moreland jokes, “If we’re not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn’t need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it’s] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.”[{23}](#) As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That’s joy far beyond happiness!

## **Takeaways & Practical Applications**

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.”[{24}](#)

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if...”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.”[{25}](#)

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:[{26}](#)

**Step 1: Relabeling**: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”[{27}](#)

**Step 2: Reframing**: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

**Step 3: Refocusing:** Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

**Step 4: Revaluating:** After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.<sup>{28}</sup> Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.<sup>{29}</sup>

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23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
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# COVID Conditioning: A Viral Outbreak is (Re)Shaping Us and Our World

*Byron Barlowe probes the underlying implications of the global reaction to COVID-19 from a worldview level, asking if we may be being conditioned to accept unbiblical views without realizing it.*

You and I are being conditioned, you know that, right? It's a daily thing. Events and messages work on us, and we need to learn to shape them before they shape us. We must take in the right stuff to counter lies and well-intended overreach.

All of a sudden a universal and ubiquitous mind-and-heart-shaper has hit the world like an alien invasion. The tension and suspense feels like that in the film *Signs*: sitting in the basement, waiting for green "men" to creep into the boarded-up farmhouse, getting snatches of what's going on in the outside world through a baby monitor. We are covered over with everything COVID-19 virus: news of it, perhaps even the real effects of it as a sickness. But for most of us the newly-minted mandates by mayors and governors, and social pressures from friends and family stemming from the worldwide reaction is the main reality of our lives as we "shelter in place" and are bombarded with a constant stream of information. It's ruining investment portfolios—at least for now "on paper"—and skyrocketing the recently record-low unemployment numbers. People are scared for themselves and loved ones since so much is unknown.

How is all this change changing us? Materially, how will shifting norms transform public policy and law, along with our

personal beliefs? What will the upending of our economy, civic, and personal lives mean? For folks with secure jobs and schoolchildren, is it simply about getting through a few weeks of downtime and home-work, commonsense hygiene and personal contact avoidance? Or will we be forever stamped with new attitudes and convictions birthed by events beyond our control?

## **We are Responsible for Our Thoughts and Beliefs**

Brain scientists confirm what good pastors, parents, and coaches teach: we can't necessarily control what we go through, but our reaction to it is up to us. Don't get "Corona'd"! We can either fall mindlessly into lockstep with what we're told, or to run this experience through a wise grid and conquer fear and foolishness. Cognitive researcher and Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf emphasizes the power of mental self-control: "As we think, we change the physical nature of our brain. As we consciously direct our thinking, we can wire out toxic patterns of thinking and replace them with healthy thoughts . . . . *It all starts in the realm of the mind, with our ability to think and choose—the most powerful thing in the universe after God, and indeed, fashioned after God.*"[\[1\]](#)

The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of our Creator God, acknowledged this reality when writing to the first Century Roman church and, by extension, to us today. If he were writing what became Romans 12:1-2 to contemporary folks he may have emphasized an action point first (verse 2) and expanded his words' scope to entail what early believers took for granted: God as the center of all things. Their worldview, including their view of the universe (cosmology), was hierarchical and infused with "God-ness."—Our temptation to trust in God-optional techno-science and complex government structures would be alien to our ancient Christian brethren. Yet, there were competing views of the way the seen and unseen

worlds work, so Paul's admonition to develop their new Christ-inhabited mind is just as germane today.

It might have read something like, "Do not be conditioned by the world [all that is other-than-God, the cosmos, and anti-biblical realms, including your own self-created view of the world] but be reconditioned by the total upgrading of your mind in a new operating system downloaded by the entrance of the Holy Spirit when you believed. This will help you discern how to use that new mind wholeheartedly, purely serving through your body, which is only fitting and quite pleasing as your service to the Master of created reality, Himself the 'I Am' Reality."

## **It's Real for Me Too**

I'm not immune from the scare and worry. My smartphone just dinged: my son's second interview for his first career job set for 90 minutes from now was just cancelled. The recently thriving corporation—a very promising prospect—has frozen all hiring due to COVID-19. On the other line is a daughter who is seeking a low-income service position since her employer has no jobs in the pipeline. Our other daughter, an Intensive Care Unit nurse, feels the pressure of shortages and health risks. She posted a picture of herself in a mask and gown, disease prevention protocols called "Droplet Precautions." Their medical equipment is inadequate and has to be washed and reused. A friend's fiancé's family have all been laid off: dad, mom, and siblings. It's up to me to regulate my Corona-news intake, take my anxiety to God, and trust him. But I am determined not to be led into fear and one-sided thinking and to help others.

## **Mind-Conditioning: Words Matter to Our Worldview**

Harsh new realities are marked by new verbiage which is always

a sign of cultural change and often a signal of improper controlling (“shelter in place,” “social distancing,” “presumptive positive,” “an abundance of caution”). Euphemisms like these mask meanings. In order of appearance, they clearly mean “Stay home, keep apart, we presume that he/she is a carrier, and we are going into high-control mode.” As philosopher Peter Kreeft writes, “Control language and you control thought; control thought and you control action; control action and you control the world.” Are you and I being conditioned to become used to changes we may not want?[\[2\]](#)

In the chaos, those of us with downtime and a biblical view of life need to use it to reflect and speak into a frightened and confused world. In the larger pluralistic community, *how we respond collectively and personally will in no small way determine the arc of our future.* As Dr. J.P. Moreland says, “Each situation in our lives is an occasion for either positive formation or negative deformation.”[\[3\]](#) Yet, this is not simply a personal matter. We are citizens and need to be active ones.

Basic assumptions about reality–worldview presuppositions we just take for granted–tend to sit like bedrock or sinkholes underneath the foundations of cultures, families, and individual lives. We either don’t know about them or ignore them, especially in hectic times of real or perceived crisis. They’re deep, unseen, and usually of no concern until events unearth them or an earthquake shakes things up. Sinkholes cause collapse. Bedrock stands.

## **Specific Concerns About Corona-Conditioning**

Here are some concerns I have as a teacher of biblical worldview discernment as this worldwide quake rattles on:

*Have we become too beholden to medical science for direction?*  
Every human life is infinitely precious—a very biblical stance

given that we are made in God's image, that He died for all people, and that He desires for none to perish (Genesis 1:27; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet, how does a society weigh its view of life-value versus the inevitability of sickness and death? Citizens demand a disease-free life without pain and engage in death-avoidance, then take "death with dignity"; the medical establishment pretends it can deliver all that. Can outbreaks like this be allowed to shut down entire economies and render personal freedoms moot? Only if we play along with such pretense. An international obsession with killing it ignores everything else. Will our COVID-19 response cause more harm than good? *How* one answers such concerns, not whether such dilemmas *should* happen, is at issue. Our personal worldviews and collective societal constructs—which we can help change—will determine controllable outcomes. We will not determine uncontrollable.

This is *not* to say that public health decrees are wrong in principle nor to necessarily question at least some of those being decreed in this situation, for example voluntary at-home work and study. *Repeating louder this time: I am not saying a massive and unusual response is bad or wrong in and of itself.* Nevertheless, history is absolute regarding the exercise of such power—it almost never regresses. 9-11 and subsequent one-off attempted terrorist acts put in place onerous rules for air passengers that look permanent. Progress, in this sense, may be regress if it unrealistic and ill-conceived.

## **Conditioning Reality Itself?**

*Is Modern mankind seeking to short-circuit reality and its consequences?* This is the biggest underlying issue. There's something new in the air: near-unanimous mass morality based in rapidly fueled public opinion further fed by transnational fear. I call it "CoronaVirus Virus." So far, epidemiologists and medical scientists are calling the shots for a global society. Pundits pump up the hype before we can know. Public

peer pressure (along with corporate acquiescence and promotion) guarantee an unquestioning going-along for most people and institutions.

We constantly hear and read the phrase, "It's just the right thing to do." This orientation raises the question, "Why is it the right thing to do? What is the moral grounding for that decision?" "The greater good" is the mantra of a [utilitarian](#) worldview that eventually erases the kind of individual freedom of moral agents which Scripture honors. The people in power decide what is good for all the rest. In a pluralistic society like ours, the privileging of choice was traditionally baked into the very fabric of public policy. Law allows leeway for disputable matters of conscience—at least they did before the advent of "hate crimes" which require God-like knowledge of motives. Such fundamental precepts of liberty have long been eroding. In this new Corona-driven milieu, dictates like government ordered shuttering of businesses and stay-at-home decrees means they may never be fully regained. Let's at least realize this, even if the calculus of health-risk mitigation over civil liberty wins the day.

Then there's the prospect of the next pandemic. Some virus is surely incubating for debut next year. Will this draconian level be the new standard of response? How will our economy or that of the world (who often follow our lead) survive under such control?

## **"What, again, is government's role?"**

Who is pausing even for a moment to ask about various requirements, "Is this a bridge too far?" That leads to the other great concern: the directives from medical science's mass diagnosis-for-the-world are, of course, implemented by government. But [the biblical view of the role of government](#) is pretty much limited to policing and making war. Admittedly, society and hence, government has multiplied in complexity—an unbiblical situation given the limits mentioned—therefore

public health and economic interventions are somewhat necessary. Absolutely, there are critical emergency situations and this is one of them. It would be unconscionable to allow an epidemic to spread willy-nilly on its own.

However, again, is anyone hitting Pause to ask how far is too far? One hopes that in retrospect, this crisis engenders a throttling back and overturning of policies that helped us get in this pickle (e.g., Federal Reserve-mandated interventions and supposed fixes which are being implemented again; also, allowing a Communist foreign nation a choke hold on pharmaceutical and medical supply chains to gain the “common good” of cheap goods while caregivers do without). Government solutions for all of life. Did we vote this in? Will we do it again in November?

## **Government Tyranny in Sight?**

Most worrisome is a move toward what appears more like a police state. In Jordan, missionaries report that 400 people have been arrested for leaving their apartments. [Refugee relief workers cobble together care](#) in an impossible situation. A Kentucky man was kept in his home somehow after he refused to *self-isolate* (another new term in the popular vernacular)—I don't know the details. That spooked me. I wish he cared enough to stay away from people, but when it comes down to it, he could be shot in his own neighborhood—presumably on his own property—for leaving. Explain that to your six-year-old. A *shelter in place* order for all counties surrounding Kansas City is to be enforced by police. Cops deciding to fine or arrest you for leaving your home for other than trips to the doctor, grocery store, or cleaners? Politicians telling us what's essential may be necessary but seems arbitrary at best. Talk of state borders closing for a sickness? This is a novel consideration, far as I know! Does the Coronavirus rise to the level of a nuclear fallout situation? Is this our shared future? As author and

apologist Dr. Ken Boa asks (in a personal email), “Given the nature of interconnectivity in a digital world, we now live within plausible sight of a fear-induced technological plague that could lead to a totalitarian outcome.”

## **Choices, Not Conditioned Responses**

Again, all I am asking is, “Does the necessity of this drastic a world-changing meta-response go without saying? Could a relatively restrained response now be wise—despite the public relations suicide of facing a sometimes mad mob morality?” On the other hand, “Is freedom—economic and cultural—worth more lives? Whose feet would that be laid at? Politicians? The medical establishment (they are simply doing their calling)? Fate’s? God’s?”

If the choice is between saving every possible life and forever changing life itself for earth’s entire population, where is the middle ground and how does a society find it? That boat has sailed, I fear. Relativistic, ever-changing ideals and their progressive promotion have won the day. The mindset of “We are going to win this thing, no matter the cost!” reigns triumphant in headlines.

There’s a worldview at work—learn to notice it: note the irony of a Postmodern relativism entwined with a Modernist certainty regarding mankind’s ability to control what used to be called an “act of God.” That’s what the highly moralistic and humanistic [John Mauldin](#) is unabashedly promoting, I believe. One more mass-mediated call to controlling an out of control universe. As if we could.

## **Be At Peace, Christian, And Spread That Peace**

For individual believers, a biblically realistic and optimistic response is to shelter in place (“abide in Me”). Rest in the peace and assurance of a loving, sovereignly

overseeing Creator who will make all things right someday, whose agenda is being met. The best outward response toward unbelievers is to share not only the certainty of that hope, but the gospel that leads to hope in a disease-free, worry-free, perfectly functional and loving society of brother and sisters in Christ. Eternal perspective is the conditioning we must seek. Because we're all being conditioned. It is truly a daily thing.

Meanwhile, pray for the individuals in charge and their decision-making to be sound. As a new normal reconditions minds and hearts around the globe at the speed of Internet connections, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed" by the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2).

### Notes

1. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, p. 20, emphasis mine.
2. [www.azquotes.com/quote/1333869](http://www.azquotes.com/quote/1333869), accessed 3/23/2020.
3. J.P. Moreland, *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices That Brought Peace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

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## How Can I Make God Answer My Prayers My Way?

How can I get God to give me what I want? That's often at the root of our interest in prayer. If we're honest, that's the question we want answered when we read books on prayer, listen to a message or podcast on prayer, or talk to people known as prayer warriors.

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# Instead of New Year's Resolutions

Fill in the blank: New Year's \_\_\_\_\_.

You probably either supplied "Eve" or "Resolutions," right?

Resolutions are intentions that may last days or weeks, but so often they peter out before we even get used to using the new year in our dates. May I suggest that instead of forming resolutions, we spend time asking some powerfully insightful questions that will help us evaluate ourselves truthfully and helpfully?

Here are three questions that many community/accountability groups ask each other regularly (as in, weekly):

**What am I doing to feed myself (spiritually)?** *How am I spending time in God's word and other sources of spiritual truth and wisdom such as books?*

**What am I doing to feed my flesh?** *How am I indulging my appetites and desires in ways that glorify myself instead of God?*

**What am I doing to feed others?** *How am I pointing others to Christ and helping them grow spiritually?*

My pastor at Watermark Community Church-Plano, Kyle Kaigler, is especially good at pointed questions. Every morning, as he thinks back on the previous day, he examines himself in four areas:

**Where was I hooked?** (caught in a bad habit that controls me)

**Where was I cold?** (being so self-focused that I failed to be

loving and kind to those around me)

**Where was I scared?** (allowing my fear of man to keep me from saying and doing the things I should be)

**Where was I proud?** (taking credit for what God did)

(Pastor Tim Keller asks these same questions: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/help-with-prayer-simple-clear-gospel-devotion-from-tim-keller/>)

Kyle also offers these questions:

John Piper says that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” So, looking back over the last 12 months:

**What are the most God-glorifying occasions over this past year that came from finding satisfaction in Him?** *When was I moved to erupt in gratitude and praise for what God did in my life? Were there sweet moments of deep connection with others, or a “lightbulb moment” when He revealed truth to me in a way that zapped lies and wrong beliefs? Were there moments of realizing I was just immersed in His goodness?*

**What was a distraction to the glory of God?** *In what areas of my life is my stubborn affinity for my flesh, getting my way, insisting on staying in my comfort zone, serving like mud that covers up “Christ in me, the hope of glory”? Where did my entrenched habits (such as continually checking my phone) function like a stop sign, keeping God at a distance? How have I tuned Him out so that I miss the ways He wants to nudge me, direct me, lead me through the day?*

Here are some helpful spiritual assessment questions:

**What has God been teaching me in His word?** We should be recording the things the Holy Spirit is showing us in our time in His word so we can remind ourselves of His lessons and insights. Otherwise we are the guy from James 1 who looks in a

mirror and then turns away, thoughtlessly unaware of what he looks like.

### **How's my time with the Lord?**

- a. Consistent and meaningful (It's ok to choose this option)
- b. Consistent but not so meaningful (I am faithful to go before the Lord but I leave the time unfulfilled)
- c. Inconsistent but meaningful (I don't do it very often but when I do, He is faithful to meet me there)
- d. Inconsistent and not meaningful (it's just not happening)

(If a or c) **How is God transforming my life?** What is God revealing about Himself and His desire for my life? How is my heart being changed to more faithfully follow where He is leading? What have I surrendered (or still working on surrendering) to Jesus' control? How is my life changing so He is increasing, and I am decreasing?

(If b or d) **What are the barriers to consistent and meaningful time with God?** (Busyness, worldliness, selfishness, sin—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, sinful pride of life)

### **Am I sharing my story of how Jesus Christ changed my life?**

**Am I being a good steward of the body God gave me?**

**Am I being a good steward of the resources He has given me?**

And finally, again thanks to Kyle, here are some interesting survey questions for family members:

### **Spouse survey**

1. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *couple*?
2. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *family*?
3. What would you consider the key challenges we faced as a family this past year? What about in our marriage?

4. If someone were to ask you, "Describe your current marriage relationship." What would you say and why?
5. If you could change anything about last year, what would it be and why?
6. Based on the experiences that we have had as a couple and as a family, what have you learned about God and His work in our lives?
7. What are 3 trips or activities that you would enjoy doing together this next year?
8. What do I do that really ministers to you and you would love it if I did it more?
9. What are your top fears/concerns for each of our children?

### **Kid Survey**

1. What have been some of the best times you have had with me this past year?
2. If you had to give me some advice on being a better parent, what would it be and why?
3. What are some things that you would like to talk with me about and why?
4. What are some of your fears that you would like me to pray for you about?
5. What is something that you would like to do with me?
6. How can I help you grow as a Christian?
7. As you consider conversations and time together as a family over the past year, what new things have you learned or understood more about God?

I think these powerful questions, answered thoughtfully and truthfully, will serve us better than any New Years Resolution we've ever made.

This blog post originally appeared at

# What Does Trusting God Look Like?

When friends are frozen by fear and anxiety, I often suggest they recite Psalm 56:3 over and over: “When I am afraid, I will trust in You.”

But what does it mean to trust God? What does it look like in real life? How do we understand *how* to trust Him?

I recently asked this question on Facebook and was deeply blessed by the wisdom and experience of friends who have learned how to trust God in the refining fires of life in a fallen world.

One scripture reference was cited again and again, probably the best go-to verse on trusting God, Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
And do not lean on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He will direct your paths.

Verse 3 is a parallelism, a Hebrew form of idea rhyming, where two ideas are complementary sides of the same coin, so to speak. *Trusting in the Lord with all your heart* means *not leaning on our own understanding*. If we’re not leaning on our own understanding, that means leaning on God’s understanding—and His character, and His goodness, and His love. *Acknowledging Him in all our ways* means continually orienting ourselves toward Him the way a plant turns to the

light. And choosing, DELIBERATELY choosing, to refuse to lean on our own understanding, leaning hard into Him instead.

So trust is a kind of leaning, transferring our weight onto someone or something else.

I get leaning.

30 years ago I started using a cane because my weak polio leg was only going to get weaker. It was amazing how much more instant stability I had. Which is what happens when we lean on God.

So trusting means CHOOSING.

We make one initial choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, especially when life doesn't make sense, and then we continue to practice making that choice over and over.

I think there are three aspects of trusting God: Making the initial choice to trust Him, reminding ourselves of what is true, and continuing to choose to trust.

### **Choosing to Trust**

Trust starts with a definitive, intentional decision to “step over the line” by turning from doing things our way, trusting in ourselves and our own understanding, to transfer our dependence to God. Here's a word of wisdom concerning not relying on ourselves and our own understanding [read: manipulating]: “Trust is living without scheming.”

One wise friend shared, “Trust is the expectation of good based on the character of God. I remind myself in the middle of the muddle: ‘This story is not over yet.’”

Have you ever seen scared little children pressing hard into their parents? It's what they do to their mommies and daddies because it's the nature of emotionally healthy children to trust their parents, especially when they're scared.

Pressing hard is a picture of trust.

Trusting happens when we realize, "I am not in control. I release my illusion of control and give the reins over to the Lord."

One friend wrote, "There's usually a point where you have to admit you no longer have the reins. For me, I can recall specific instances where I have said, 'Lord, whatever will bring You the most glory . . . [do it.]' It's like something in the spiritual realm is released when we allow God to be God in our lives."

I love that she used the word "released." That is such a powerful concept. I'm taken to Matthew 11:28-30—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Releasing the weariness and burden of trying to run our own lives in our own strength onto Jesus is how we enter His rest, which we only get on the other side of trusting.

Along the same lines, trusting God looks like relinquishing worries and anxieties, rolling them over into Jesus' more-than-capable hands, and then choosing to leave them there. ("No, I'm not going to worry about that, I gave it to Jesus on Tuesday at 3:14 p.m.")

One of my fellow Bible study leaders shared this gem:

"I learned to swing dance about a year before becoming a believer and one of the ways my partner and I would practice was for me to be blindfolded. I had a tendency to anticipate the moves that he would lead as opposed to letting him lead me and I was unintentionally hijacking his lead—very often. The blind fold made me wait, listen, and not anticipate. He was able to lead me through combinations I would have never been able to imagine (he was a much more experienced dancer than

me). In my early walk, as I disciplined myself to walk with the Lord, I would reflect on my experience with dancing blindfolded and it gave me great courage to trust Him through things unseen.”

So trusting means choosing with the heart and mind, “I will follow YOU, Lord!”

One more picture of what trusting God looks like. Several friends responding to my Facebook post invoked the idea of *clinging* to Him, “even when it’s scary and life doesn’t appear to make sense. Knowing that, even in the hard times, He is working to perfect us, to grow us, to give us hope, and to bring glory, through us, to Himself. It means the assurance that He has the big picture of His plan in sight and everything He allows/ordains for me is a piece of that.”

Maybe nobody understands the concept of “clinging” like the tourist who discovered his harness wasn’t attached to the frame of his hang glider. He literally had to hang on to the frame for dear life for his harrowing two-minute flight.



What a picture of trust as clinging!

Trust is a lovely “holy stubbornness” in clinging to God’s goodness and sovereignty no matter how we feel, just as the hang glider stubbornly clung to the frame of his glider.

**Reminding Ourselves of What is True**

Once we've made the choice to trust God, we need to keep on trusting. The way we build our trust is to remind ourselves, over and over and over, of trustworthy truths about God:

- God is good.
- He will never leave us.
- He loves us.
- He is in control.
- He never makes mistakes.
- He can be trusted.

The continual process of trusting God is not only speaking the truth to ourselves, but reminding ourselves of His faithfulness in the past. That's why it's good to keep a journal—one friend keeps what she calls her “brag book” about God. I call mine a “God Sightings Book.” We can also build an “altar” (something physical that serves as a reminder of what God did, such as planting a tree).

I love what one friend said: “Trusting God means that I actively, willfully refuse to worry and instead I fix my gaze on Christ and recite to myself Who Scripture reveals Him to be, His promises, and everything He has already done.”

Another friend has been faithfully slogging through a long period of not seeing what God is doing: “Trusting God means trying to keep a posture of ‘open hands, eyes up’ and a curiosity that has us constantly wondering aloud, ‘What are you up to, God? We can't wait to see.’”

I love how she and her husband live out their trust: *OK, Lord, we can trust You or we can freak out and make things happen on our own. That would be stupid. So let's go back to thanking You for the details of how You are proving Yourself faithful day after day. We trust You by NOT taking matters into our own hands. We trust You by continuing to wait.*

Another friend drew on two different ways for her husband and her to make it through a particularly tough challenge: “One

was to say out loud and mean it: 'Lord, we choose to trust in You through this.'" They would also repeat 2 Chronicles 20:12—"Lord, we don't know what to do, but our eyes are on You."

### **Continuing to Choose to Trust**

So trust starts out as a choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, and it continues as we remind ourselves of WHAT is true, and that HE is true.

But trust sinks its roots down deep into our hearts and souls as we continue to choose dependence on the Lord instead of ourselves. There has to be an "on-goingness" to real trust, because it's not a one-time decision, but an ongoing position built by continual choices to keep on trusting.

One mama friend was shocked and rocked to learn her baby would be born with Down Syndrome. She wrote,

"Since having [my daughter], God has grown my trust in Him immensely. For me, trusting God means to really know His heart, His goodness, His love for me and my children, and knowing He has a perfect plan . . . even when He doesn't swoop in and make things easier. Trusting God is a daily relationship talking, listening, and praying with Him. Even when circumstances don't change and life is and will be difficult. Even when you see your child suffer—trusting Him looks like having an eternal focus, not an earthly one.

"Trusting Him looks like your 6-month old having heart surgery and meditating on worship music to remind you of His goodness and love. It's choosing him over and over again no matter if His plan aligns with yours."

I responded to her, "My takeaway from your absolutely precious post is that trust can look like a kind of 'holy stubbornness' of choosing, over and over, to lash ourselves to a good and loving God who has proven His faithfulness over and over.

Despite circumstances which only tend to obscure, not define, ultimate reality." I love to see evidences of that "holy stubbornness" in people!

Another friend pointed out that wavering trust can mean going off-track into the weeds of feelings. (Which are valuable as indicators of what's going on in our hearts, but are terrible indicators of truth! Feelings are like the warning lights on the dashboards of our cars, but they make awful compasses...)

"When my trust in God wavers even the least little bit, I have a tendency to lean toward my emotions. Not that emotions aren't valid and valuable, but when they begin to lead my thoughts, it can throw everything haywire. I start believing lies. The only antidote is seeking and speaking His Truth over every feeling—I suppose it's what the Scripture calls "taking every thought captive." I love the vivid language there: I can picture this tall strong person (the statement of Truth) coming up to one of my gone-wild feelings with a pair of handcuffs and shouting, 'You're under arrest!' I'm a visual person and sometimes this is what grappling in prayer looks like for me."

There is no passivity in trusting God. It's a very active way of choosing to think and remember and maintain our position of dependence on Him. In the book *Surrender to Love*, David Benner writes about teaching a group of non-swimmers how to snorkel. Because they had learned to trust him as a spiritual teacher, and they had learned the spiritual principle of surrender, they were willing to enter the water and let go of the side of the boat. They trusted him when he told them they would float. They trusted him when he told them they could breathe through the snorkel without having to lift their heads out of the water.

Trusting God is like getting out of the boat, donning the snorkel, and trusting that the water will hold you up while you breathe with your face in the water.

It's leaning,

It's clinging.

It's releasing and relinquishing into God's hands.

And, at its core, trusting God is saying, "Thy will be done."  
Enjoy.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/what\\_does\\_trusting\\_god\\_look\\_like](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_does_trusting_god_look_like)  
on November 19, 2019.

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## **Scraping Ceilings and Souls: Lessons on Sanctification From a Home Improvement Project**

*The process of upgrading and repairing Byron Barlowe's home helped him to see how God does the same kind of transformation in the souls of Christ-followers.*

My wife and I are living in a suspended state of misery in our own home. It's like camping in a plastic-lined dustbin after a tornado blew furniture and books into random piles. Hidden in every crevice there's a thin fog of whitish dust and snow that won't melt. "How long, O Lord?" This odyssey started as we launched a long-awaited kitchen remodel, which would be stress enough: "Where's that sink they took out with the bulk waste—we need it back until the granite people come to install the new one!" Camping indoors again.

But then we succumbed to the contractor's compelling sell-job on removing popcorn from our ceilings—you know, that lumpy stuff hanging from 20<sup>th</sup> century ceilings. "They'll get it done and clean it up for you." No sweat, right? Right!

Anyone who's lived through a major renovation or addition can testify to the disturbance. It's an all-encompassing project. "How many more trips to Home Depot?" I'm at the library writing this and will head to the shower at the YMCA. The paint makes it hard to sleep. Finally, we left for vacation. Disruption of routines and an exploded sense of place overwhelms and badgers us.

Yet God is in it. The ordeal is bringing out loads of attitudes and frustrations in me, especially since God seems to be doing an *attitude renovation* within me simultaneously. Is that dual lesson cruel of God, or spiritually strategic? Do I really grow when things sail smoothly along?

Yes, the promise of a new look and feel gets lost in the temporary tiresomeness of it all. The more you have, the more you pay in so many ways! Yet, what we had was not up to grade. Some of it was poised to cause disaster, like some plumbing in our kitchen. Replacing the working fridge with a cooler one (accidental pun) revealed a faulty valve. It had to be replaced. In the same way, my soul needs a makeover.

Like a master plumber, the Lord needs to hook up the new pipes of grace he has for me. He's renovating my heart. I need to grow into the new creation I already am. New openings for new blessings, old things made new. Getting hung up on my way of seeing issues or settling for an inadequate view of God's goodness calls for a major overhaul. The Lord is committed to make this happen as I somewhat grudgingly lay my life before him in submission—again. It hurts and is a mess, like the unexpected plumbing issue. But like the fridge fix, it makes possible a bounty of unspoiled fruit and prevents a nasty flood!

Back to the originally intended project: the process for the ceiling redux is a multi-step process. It requires the following:

- **scraping**: complete with the roar of compressor to spray water, a sharp scraper, and the old junk that falls to floor (and into everything) like oatmeal or, well, wet popcorn
- **“mud”** to fill holes and fix gouges, a lot like grout for tile or what painters do with picture hanger holes
- **texture** for a new, updated look, smoother than the stuff from the days of puffy hairdos and disco music!
- And **paint** to “top” it off and complete the enjoyable and more livable change.

Simple processes aside, the disarray and disruption of either kind of renovation cannot be overstated. Every last physical item, habit, and way of life has been overturned, from sleeping to showering, eating to breathing itself. Repeat after me, self: *temporary pain for years of gain*. And isn't that what spiritual growth is like? Is it worth it? This is the operative question each time the Lord convicts us of sin or a character issue. Sanctification—the project of turning us into the real likeness of Christ—promises *eternal* reward and glory! It showcases the goodness and truth of God. Maturity matters, even though its development stinks at efficiency and convenience from a human perspective.

Because negative thought patterns burn into our minds and even have bodily effects, they need to be peeled off, removed. Kind of like the dragon skin of the character Eustace, the unbearably cynical and snooty boy character in C.S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. His spiritual blindness and insensitivity had to go but was painful to remove. Sin sticks and separates us from God, goodness and others. Due to its toxic spiritual effects, transformation can't be kept waiting. We, like young Eustace, need to release our sense of

entitlement and thanklessness, rid ourselves of a false sense of pleasure and pride. He have to grow new skin. We too must be scraped over, repaired, remade and painted afresh.

What does this spiritual scraping of sanctification look like in more detail? Well, not unlike ceiling refurbishment in so many ways.

## **Necessary Disruption**

First, like those old popcorn ceilings, coverings in my soul simply must be replaced, and not for reasons of fashion. *Scraping ceilings and hearts is inconvenient*—the workers are in our house all day. The Lord does his work while we do our lives. There is never a “good time” for it. You just have to suck it up and have your life turned around a bit. I have been forced, in no small part by dealing with contractors and suppliers, to wrestle down thoughts like, “People are clueless—I wish they’d smarten up and pay attention.” While there is truth behind those convictions as we all know, people have reasons for distraction and the unredeemed have no choice but to be self-centered and confused. The Lord has been revealing what it means to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). When my protective and cynical dragon skin layers are removed, I begin to appreciate how gentle and ordered others’ minds can be. Their skills and especially their ability to roll with messy, changeable situations amazes me. They are better than me at a lot of things. Regardless of my perceptions, God sees them as priceless and since he loves me supremely, so I can afford to regard them as more important than myself.

## **Healing Takes Time, Repetition**

Second, *filling in the holes and cracks means going over the same “ground” again*. It’s detailed work and has to set up and dry before you can move on. This does not feel efficient, yet it ensures that things are permanently restored. Often, the soulish equivalent of this comes in the form of deep

fellowship and counseling—filling in the injury done to our souls with solid truth and love. The old becomes new again, the cracked smooth, the damaged healed. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12).

## **The Grace of Preparation and Protection**

In fact, prepping the house took the most time: taping plastic to the floor, draping furniture and ceiling fans, disconnecting light fixtures and removing air vents. It’s as if the protection of our belongings and dwelling takes precedence over the new look and underlying stuff. Isn’t this God’s way? As his Spirit renovates our lives, he lines us with protective layers of grace and love, draping us with the encouragement of prayers he evokes on our behalf and the love of fellow Christ-followers.

## **Renovation Takes Force**

Third, just like ceiling overhauls, *retexturing* is yet another wearying pass over the same square footage for the purpose of renewal—and *it has to be forced*. Workers hold a little orange plastic tank attached to a hose that’s hooked up to a compressor, then spray the new coating on the freshly prepared surface. The pneumatic motor kicks into a whining screech that fills the house. Without that push, the spray can’t come out of the nozzle ten feet in the air. Similarly, the Spirit’s regeneration of our souls is noisy, messy, pushy and downright unpleasant. We may tire of reaching up to do our part in spreading newness onto the same surface from which God has removed the old stuff. Our shoulders and hearts get exhausted, sore from holding up our part of the work. The air is a bit nasty to breathe. But if our new life is to be realized, it has to be done, forcibly.

## **The Stuff of Spiritual Renovation**

Just what is such *spiritual newness*? The material used is

God's Word illumined by his Spirit, creating new pathways for our minds, hearts and wills, right down to the bone and marrow of our beliefs. It means filling our minds with "whatever is true . . . honorable . . . right, . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good repute . . . any excellence [and] anything worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8), being "transformed" and "renewed" in our minds (Romans 12:1-2), reckoning (deciding to be so) ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans

6:11). All of these fresh Spirit-pumped coatings can cover our internal overheads with new, living realities. That is, thinking and believing in a life-giving outlook that takes seriously the promise that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) is the ultimate renewal. Now, the house has a new sky, if you will, and the sun is ready to shine a bit brighter. As we capitulate to the often onerous process of scraping, mudding, and texturing, we experience a brand new covering for ceilings and souls-in-Christ. And now for the *coup de grace*!

## **New Paint, New Spiritual Robes**

*Painting* is the final stage of this household transformation. Gone are the ugly, useless bits, replaced with the smoothness of shalom—peace-filled blessedness—where defects get filled in and fixed as we submit to the work. Likewise, as we are molded into Christ's likeness, we put on robes of pure white righteousness (Revelation 19:8; 3:4). So much can be said about the glory of holiness produced in willing saints. Suffice to say that the glory that awaits us outshines even the brightest hues applied to earthly surfaces. Our spiritual man is growing brighter, even as our bodies break down and fade. "We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Many of us have ceilings that overhang us with old, outdated

looks. All believers in Christ have rooms—perhaps whole houses—that need reworking. Let the scraping begin. It's worth it!