

# The Case for Christ – Reasons to Believe in the Reality of Christ

*Dr. Ray Bohlin summarizes the evidence found by Lee Strobel when researching the question: Is Jesus Christ really who the Bible says He is? He shows that we have strong evidence on every front that backs up our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This important apologetic argument helps us understand the enduring value of Christianity.*

## Sometimes the Evidence Doesn't Stack Up

Skeptics around the world claim that Jesus either never said He was God or He never exemplified the activities and mindset of God. Either way they rather triumphantly proclaim that Jesus was just a man. Some will go so far as to suggest that He was a very moral and special man, but a man nonetheless. Well, Lee Strobel was just such a skeptic. For Strobel, there was far too much evidence against the idea of God, let alone the possibility that God became a man. God was just mythology, superstition, or wishful thinking.

As a graduate of Yale Law School, an investigative reporter, and eventual legal affairs editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, Strobel was familiar with the weighing of evidence. He was familiar with plenty of university professors who knew Jesus as an iconoclastic Jew, a revolutionary, or a sage, but not God. He had read just enough philosophy and history to support his skepticism.

As Strobel himself says,

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful

invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought. [\[1\]](#)

That last hesitation came as a result of his wife's conversion. After the predictable rolling of the eyes and fears of his wife being the victim of a bait and switch scam, he noticed some very positive changes he found attractive and intriguing. The reporter in him eventually wanted to get to the bottom of this and he launched his own personal investigation. Setting aside as best he could his own personal interest and prejudices, he began reading and studying, interviewing experts, examining archaeology and the Bible.

Over time the evidence began to point to the previously unthinkable. Strobel's book *The Case for Christ* is a revisiting of his earlier quest. He interviews a host of experts along three lines of evidence. In the first section Strobel investigates what he calls the record. What did the eyewitnesses say they saw and heard? Can they be trusted? Can the gospel accounts be trusted? What about evidence from outside the Bible? Does archaeology help or hurt the case for Christ? Strobel puts tough questions to his experts and their answers will both surprise and exhilarate.

In the third section of the book, Strobel investigates the resurrection. He examines the medical evidence, explores the implications of the empty tomb, the reliability of the appearances after the resurrection, and the wide-ranging circumstantial evidence.

However, here we'll focus on the middle section of the book, the analysis of Jesus Himself. Did Jesus really think He was God? Was He crazy? Did He act like He was God? And did He truly match the picture painted in the Old Testament of the Messiah?

**Was Jesus Really Convinced that He Was**

## the Son of God?

The psychological profiler is a new weapon in the arsenal of criminal investigators. They understand that behavior reflects personality. These highly trained professionals examine the actions and words of criminals and from these clues construct a psychological and sometimes historical profile of the likely perpetrator.

These same skills can be applied to our question of whether Jesus actually thought He was God. We can learn a great deal about what Jesus thought of Himself, not just from what He said, but what He did and how He did it.

Ben Witherington was educated at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (M. Div.) and the University of Durham in England (Th. D.). He has taught at several universities and seminaries and authored numerous books and articles about the person of Jesus.

Strobel began his interview by stating that Jesus wasn't very forthcoming about His identity in public, even mysterious. He didn't come right out and say He was the Son of God or the Messiah. Couldn't it be that Jesus simply didn't see Himself that way?

Witherington points out that Jesus needed to operate in the context of His day. To boldly state that He was God would have at first confused and then maddened the Jews of His day. Blasphemy was not treated lightly. Therefore He was very careful, especially at first, of what He said publicly.

There are other clues to Jesus' self-identity as God. He chose twelve disciples, as God chose the twelve nations of Israel. He called John the Baptist the greatest man on earth; yet He went on to do even greater things in His miracles. He told the Pharisees, in contradiction to much of the Old Testament law, that what defiled a man was what came out of his mouth, not

what he put in it. "We have to ask, what kind of person thinks he has the authority to set aside the divinely inspired Jewish Scriptures and supplant them with his own teaching." [\[2\]](#) Even the Romans labeled Him King of the Jews. Either Jesus actually said that or someone thought He did.

Since Jesus' followers called Him Rabboni or Rabbi, it seems they just thought of Him as a teacher and nothing more. But Witherington reminds us that Jesus actually taught in a radical new way. In Judaism, the authority of two or more witnesses was required for the proclamation of truth. But Jesus frequently said, "Amen I say to you," or in modern English, "I swear in advance to the truthfulness of what I am about to say." Jesus attested to the truth of what He was saying on His own authority. This was truly revolutionary.

The evidence that Jesus believed that He stood in the very place of God is absolutely convincing. Maybe He was just crazy. We'll explore that question next.

## **Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to be the Son of God?**

There's considerable doubt in the general public about the usefulness of psychological testimony in the courtroom. It seems that you can find some psychologist to testify to just about anything concerning someone's state of mind at the time a crime was committed. But while abuses can occur, most people recognize that a trained and experienced psychologist can offer helpful insights into a person's state of mind while examining his words and actions.

In our investigation of Jesus, if He really believed He was God, can we determine if He was crazy or insane? You can visit just about any mental health facility and be introduced to people who think they are Julius Caesar or Napoleon or even Jesus Christ. Could Jesus have been deluded?

Not so, according to Gary Collins, a psychologist with a doctorate in clinical psychology from Purdue and the author of numerous books and articles in popular magazines and professional journals. Disturbed individuals often show signs of depression or anxiety or explosive anger. But Jesus never displays inappropriate emotions.

He does get angry, but this is clearly appropriate—in the temple, for instance, when He saw the misuse of the temple courtyard and that the moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor. He didn't just get ticked off because someone was annoying Him. In fact, Jesus seems at His most composed when being challenged. In a beautiful passage, Collins describes Jesus as he would an old friend:

He was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren't seen as being important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; he responded to individuals based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed. All in all I just don't see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness. [\[3\]](#)

OK, so maybe Jesus wasn't mentally disturbed, but maybe He used psychological tricks to perform His miracles. Many illnesses are psychosomatic, so maybe His healings were just by the power of suggestion. Collins readily admits that maybe some of Jesus' miracles were of this very type, but they were still healed. And some of His miracles just can't fit this description. Jesus healed leprosy and people blind since birth, both of which would be difficult to pull off as a psychological trick. His miracles over nature also can't be explained psychologically, and raising Lazarus from the dead after being in the tomb for a few days is not the stuff of

trickery. No, Jesus wasn't crazy.

## **Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?**

Modern forensics utilizes artists who are able to sketch the appearance of a criminal based on the recollections of the victims. This is an important tool to be able to alert the public as to the appearance of a usually violent offender. In Lee Strobel's investigation of the evidence for Jesus, he uses the Old Testament as a sketch of what God is supposed to be like. If Jesus claims to be God, then what we see of Him in the Gospels should mirror the picture of God in the Old Testament.

For this purpose, Strobel interviewed Dr. D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Carson can read a dozen languages and has authored or edited over forty books about Jesus and the New Testament.

At the start of the interview, Strobel asks Carson, "What did Jesus say or do that convinces you that Jesus is God?" The answer was a little surprising. Jesus forgave sins.

We all see ourselves as having the power and authority to forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus forgave people for things they did that didn't involve Jesus at all. This was startling for that time and even today. Only God can truly forgive sins, and Jesus specifically does so on a number of occasions.[{4}](#)

In addition, Jesus considered himself to be without sin. Historically, we consider people to be holy who are fully conscious of their own failures and are fighting them honestly in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus gave no such impression. In that wonderful chapter, John 8, Jesus asks if anyone can convict Him of sin (John 8:46). The question itself is startling, but no one answers. Sinlessness is another

attribute of deity.

This chapter is a wonderful interview with Carson, covering other questions, such as: how could Jesus be God and actually be born; or say that the Father was greater than He; or not speak out strongly against the slavery of the Jewish and Roman culture; or believe in and send people to Hell? I'll leave you to explore those fascinating questions on your own in the book.

Strobel concludes that the Bible declares several attributes for God and applies them to Jesus. John 16:30 records one of the disciples saying, "Now we can see that you know all things." Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, "Surely I am with you even unto the end of the age." And in Matthew 18:20 He says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." All authority was given Him (Matthew 28:18) and Hebrews tells us that He is the same yesterday and today. So Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and immutable. In John 14:7, Jesus says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well."

## **Did Jesus—and Jesus Alone—Match the Identity of the Messiah?**

So far in Strobel's interviews with scholars we have affirmed that Jesus did claim to be God, He wasn't insane or emotionally disturbed, and He did things that only God would do. Now we want to review Strobel's interview with Louis Lapidés, a Jewish believer as to whether Jesus actually fit the Old Testament picture of what the Messiah would be like.

One of the important pieces of evidence that convinced Lapidés that Jesus was the long-looked-for Messiah was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are over forty prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled every one. Some say this is just coincidence. But, the odds of just one person fulfilling even five of these prophecies is less than one

chance in one hundred million billion—a number millions of times greater than the number of all people who have ever lived on earth.[{5}](#)

But maybe this isn't all it seems. Objections to the correlation of Jesus' life to the prophecies of the Messiah fall into four categories. The first is the coincidence argument, which we just dispelled. Perhaps the most frequently heard argument is that the gospel writers fabricated the details to make it appear that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels were written close enough in time to the actual events that, if false, critics could have exposed the details. Certainly this is true of those in the Jewish community who had every reason to squash this new religion before it got started.

Third, there is the suggestion that Jesus intentionally fulfilled these many prophecies so as to make Himself appear as the Messiah. That's conceivable for some of the prophecies, such as Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, but for others it's impossible. How could Jesus arrange for his ancestry, or place of birth, or the method of execution, or that soldiers would gamble for his clothing? The list goes on.

Fourth, perhaps Christians have just ripped these so-called prophecies out of context and have misinterpreted them. When asked, Lapidés sighed and replied:

You know, I go through books that people write to try to tear down what we believe. That's not fun to do, but I spend the time to look at each objection individually and then to research the context and the wording in the original language. And every single time, the prophecies have stood up and shown themselves to be true.[{6}](#)

What I found most intriguing about the interviews was the combination of academic integrity on the part of these scholars alongside a very evident love for the One of whom



they were speaking. For these scholars, finding the historical Jesus was not just an academic exercise, but also a life-changing personal encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it can be for you too.

## Notes

1. Lee Strobel, 1998, *The Case for Christ*, Grand Rapids Michigan/Zondervan Publishing House, p. 13.
2. Ben Witherington, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 135.
3. Gary Collins, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 147.
4. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 157-158.
5. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 183.
6. Louis Lapidus, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

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# The Historical Reliability of the Gospels – An Important Apologetic for Christianity

*Dr. Pat Zukeran provides a succinct argument for the reliability of our current copies of the four gospels. This data is an important part of any apologetic argument, i.e. defense of the veracity of the Christian faith.*

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



## Differences Between the Four Gospels

Skeptics have criticized the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, as being legendary in nature rather than historical. They point to alleged contradictions between

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They also maintain the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The late date of the writings allowed legends and exaggerations to proliferate, they say.

Are the Gospels historical or mythological?

The first challenge to address is how to account for the differences among the four Gospels. They are each different in nature, content, and the facts they include or exclude. The reason for the variations is that each author wrote to a different audience and from his own unique perspective. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to prove to them that Jesus is indeed their Messiah. That's why Matthew includes many of the teachings of Christ and makes numerous references to Old Testament prophecies. Mark wrote to a Greek or Gentile audience to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, he makes his case by focusing on the events of Christ's life. His gospel moves very quickly from one event to another, demonstrating Christ's lordship over all creation. Luke wrote to give an accurate historical account of Jesus' life. John wrote after reflecting on his encounter with Christ for many years. With that insight, near the end of his life John sat down and wrote the most theological of all the Gospels.

We should expect some differences between four independent accounts. If they were identical, we would suspect the writers of collaboration with one another. Because of their differences, the four Gospels actually give us a fuller and richer picture of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. Imagine if four people wrote a biography on your life: your son, your father, a co-worker, and a good friend. They would each focus on different aspects of your life and write from a unique perspective. One would be writing about you as a parent, another as a child growing up, one as a professional, and one as a peer. Each may include different stories or see the same event from a different

angle, but their differences would not mean they are in error. When we put all four accounts together, we would get a richer picture of your life and character. That is what is taking place in the Gospels.

So we acknowledge that differences do not necessarily mean errors. Skeptics have made allegations of errors for centuries, yet the vast majority of charges have been answered. New Testament scholar, Dr. Craig Blomberg, writes, "Despite two centuries of skeptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions."[\[1\]](#) Another scholar, Murray Harris, emphasizes, "Even then the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial detail is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical."[\[2\]](#) The four Gospels give us a complementary, not a contradictory, account.

## **The Date of the New Testament Writings: Internal Evidence**

Critics claim that the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. This would allow for myths about Jesus' life to proliferate. Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses as they claim, or were they written centuries later? The historical facts appear to make a strong case for a first century date.

Jesus' ministry was from A.D. 27-30. Noted New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by A.D. 100.[\[3\]](#) Most writings of the New Testament works were completed twenty to forty years before this. The Gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written around A.D. 60. Matthew and Luke follow and are written between A.D. 60-70; John is the final gospel, written between A.D. 90-100.

The internal evidence supports these early dates for several reasons. The first three Gospels prophesied the fall of the

Jerusalem Temple which occurred in A.D. 70. However, the fulfillment is not mentioned. It is strange that these three Gospels predict this major event but do not record it happening. Why do they not mention such an important prophetic milestone? The most plausible explanation is that it had not yet occurred at the time Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written.

In the book of Acts, the Temple plays a central role in the nation of Israel. Luke writes as if the Temple is an important part of Jewish life. He also ends Acts on a strange note: Paul living under house arrest. It is strange that Luke does not record the death of his two chief characters, Peter and Paul. The most plausible reason for this is that Luke finished writing Acts before Peter and Paul's martyrdom in A.D. 64. A significant point to highlight is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts, further supporting the traditional dating of A.D. 60. Furthermore, most scholars agree Mark precedes Luke, making Mark's Gospel even earlier.

Finally, the majority of New Testament scholars believe that Paul's epistles are written from A.D. 48-60. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches that of the Gospels. 1 Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Pauline authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's Gospel in 1 Timothy 5:18, showing us that Luke's Gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime. This would move up the time of the completion of Luke's Gospel along with Mark and Matthew.

The internal evidence presents a strong case for the early dating of the Gospels.

## **The Date of the Gospels: External**

# Evidence

Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses of the events, or were they not recorded until centuries later? As with the internal evidence, the external evidence also supports a first century date.

Fortunately, New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence. The documentary evidence for the New Testament far surpasses any other work of its time. We have over 5000 manuscripts, and many are dated within a few years of their authors' lives.

Here are some key documents. An important manuscript is the Chester Beatty Papyri. It contains most of the N.T. writings, and is dated around A.D. 250.

The Bodmer Papyri contains most of John, and dates to A.D. 200. Another is the Rylands Papyri that was found in Egypt that contains a fragment of John, and dates to A.D. 130. From this fragment we can conclude that John was completed well before A.D. 130 because, not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Greece to Egypt. Since the vast majority of scholars agree that John is the last gospel written, we can affirm its first century date along with the other three with greater assurance.

A final piece of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls Cave 7. Jose Callahan discovered a fragment of the Gospel of Mark and dated it to have been written in A.D. 50. He also discovered fragments of Acts and other epistles and dated them to have been written slightly after A.D. 50.[\[4\]](#)

Another line of evidence is the writings of the church fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in A.D. 95. in which he quoted from the Gospels and other portions of the N.T. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote

a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 115, quoting all the Gospels and other N.T. letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in A.D. 120 and quoted from the Gospels and N.T. letters. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) quotes John 3. Church fathers of the early second century were familiar with the apostle's writings and quoted them as inspired Scripture.

Early dating is important for two reasons. The closer a historical record is to the date of the event, the more likely the record is accurate. Early dating allows for eyewitnesses to still be alive when the Gospels were circulating to attest to their accuracy. The apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing to their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, 26:26). Also, the time is too short for legends to develop. Historians agree it takes about two generations, or eighty years, for legendary accounts to establish themselves.

From the evidence, we can conclude the Gospels were indeed written by the authors they are attributed to.

## **How Reliable was the Oral Tradition?**

Previously, I defended the early dating of the Gospels. Despite this early dating, there is a time gap of several years between the ascension of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. There is a period during which the gospel accounts were committed to memory by the disciples and transmitted orally. The question we must answer is, Was the oral tradition memorized and passed on accurately? Skeptics assert that memory and oral tradition cannot accurately preserve accounts from person to person for many years.

The evidence shows that in oral cultures where memory has been trained for generations, oral memory can accurately preserve and pass on large amounts of information. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reveals to us how important oral instruction and memory of divine teaching was stressed in Jewish culture. It is a well-

known fact that the rabbis had the O.T. and much of the oral law committed to memory. The Jews placed a high value on memorizing whatever writing reflected inspired Scripture and the wisdom of God. I studied under a Greek professor who had the Gospels memorized word perfect. In a culture where this was practiced, memorization skills were far advanced compared to ours today. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock states that the Jewish culture was "a culture of memory."[\[5\]](#)

Rainer Reisner presents six key reasons why oral tradition accurately preserved Jesus' teachings.[\[6\]](#) First, Jesus used the Old Testament prophets' practice of proclaiming the word of God which demanded accurate preservation of inspired teaching. Second, Jesus' presentations of Himself as Messiah would reinforce among His followers the need to preserve His words accurately. Third, ninety percent of Jesus' teachings and sayings use mnemonic methods similar to those used in Hebrew poetry. Fourth, Jesus trained His disciples to teach His lessons even while He was on earth. Fifth, Jewish boys were educated until they were twelve, so the disciples likely knew how to read and write. Finally, just as Jewish and Greek teachers gathered disciples, Jesus gathered and trained His to carry on after His death.

When one studies the teachings of Jesus, one realizes that His teachings and illustrations are easy to memorize. People throughout the world recognize immediately the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Lord's Prayer.

We also know that the church preserved the teachings of Christ in the form of hymns which were likewise easy to memorize. Paul's summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is a good example of this.

We can have confidence then that the oral tradition accurately preserved the teachings and the events of Jesus' life till they were written down just a few years later.

# The Transmission of the Gospel Texts

When I am speaking with Muslims or Mormons, we often come to a point in the discussion where it is clear the Bible contradicts their position. It is then they claim, as many skeptics, do that the Bible has not been accurately transmitted and has been corrupted by the church. In regards to the Gospels, do we have an accurate copy of the original texts or have they been corrupted?

Previously, we showed that the Gospels were written in the first century, within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. These eyewitnesses, both friendly and hostile, scrutinized the accounts for accuracy.

So the original writings were accurate. However, we do not have the original manuscripts. What we have are copies of copies of copies. Are these accurate, or have they been tampered with? As shown earlier, we have 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. When you include the quotes from the church fathers, manuscripts from other early translations like the Latin Vulgate, the Ethiopic text, and others, the total comes out to over 24,000 ancient texts. With so many ancient texts, significant alterations should be easy to spot. However, those who accuse the New Testament of being corrupted have not produced such evidence. This is significant because it should be easy to do with so many manuscripts available. The truth is, the large number of manuscripts confirm the accurate preservation and transmission of the New Testament writings.

Although we can be confident in an accurate copy, we do have textual discrepancies. There are some passages with variant readings that we are not sure of. However, the differences are minor and do not affect any major theological doctrine. Most have to do with sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar. These in no way affect any major doctrine.



Here is one example. In our Bibles, Mark 16:9-20 is debated as to whether it was part of the original writings. Although I personally do not believe this passage was part of the original text, its inclusion does not affect any major teaching of Christianity. It states that Christ was resurrected, appeared to the disciples, and commissioned them to preach the gospel. This is taught elsewhere.

The other discrepancies are similar in nature. Greek scholars agree we have a copy very accurate to the original. Westcott and Hort state that we have a copy 98.33% accurate to the original.[{7}](#) A.T. Robertson gave a figure of 99% accuracy to the original.[{8}](#) As historian Sir Fredric Kenyon assures us, "...the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."[{9}](#)

## **Do Miracles Discredit the Gospels?**

Skeptics question the accuracy of the Gospels because of the miracles. However, this is an issue of worldviews. Those who hold to a naturalistic worldview do not believe an omnipotent creator exists. All that exists is energy and matter. Therefore, miracles are impossible. Their conclusion, then, is that the miracle accounts in the Gospels are exaggerations or myths.

Those who hold to a theistic worldview can accept miracles in light of our understanding of God and Christ. God can intervene in time and space and alter the natural regularities of nature much like finite humans can in smaller limited ways. If Jesus is the Son of God, we can expect Him to perform miracles to affirm His claims to be divine. But worldviews are not where this ends. We also need to take a good look at the historical facts.

As shown previously, the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events of the life of Christ. Early dating shows eyewitnesses were alive when Gospels were circulating and could attest to their accuracy. Apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26). Therefore, if there were any exaggerations or stories being told about Christ that were not true, the eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the apostles accounts. Remember, they began preaching in Israel in the very cities and during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The Jews were careful to record accurate historical accounts. Many enemies of the early church were looking for ways to discredit the apostles' teaching. If what the apostles were saying was not true, the enemies would have cried foul, and the Gospels would not have earned much credibility.

There are also non-Christian sources that attest to the miracles of Christ. Josephus writes, "Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles." The Jewish Talmud, written in the fifth century A.D., attributes Jesus' miracles to sorcery. Opponents of the Gospels do not deny He did miracles, they just present alternative explanations for them.

Finally, Christ's power over creation is supremely revealed in the resurrection. The resurrection is one of the best attested to events in history. For a full treatment, look up the article [Resurrection: Fact or Fiction](#) here at Probe.org.

## Notes

1. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 10.
2. Ibid., 9.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 14.
4. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), 530.
5. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 80.
6. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 27-28.
7. Geisler, 474.
8. Ibid.
9. Quoted by Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 405.

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## **Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources**

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines evidence from ancient non-Christian sources for the life of Jesus, demonstrating that such sources help confirm the historical reliability of the Gospels.*

### **Evidence from Tacitus**

Although there is overwhelming evidence that the New Testament is an accurate and trustworthy historical document, many people are still reluctant to believe what it says unless there is also some independent, non-biblical testimony that corroborates its statements. In the introduction to one of his

books, F.F. Bruce tells about a Christian correspondent who was told by an agnostic friend that “apart from obscure references in Josephus and the like,” there was no historical evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible.[{1}](#) This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him “great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life.”[{2}](#) He concludes his letter by asking, “Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?”[{3}](#) The answer to this question is, “Yes, such collateral proof is available,” and we will be looking at some of it in this article.

Let’s begin our inquiry with a passage that historian Edwin Yamauchi calls “probably the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament.”[{4}](#) Reporting on Emperor Nero’s decision to blame the Christians for the fire that had destroyed Rome in A.D. 64, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . . .[{5}](#)

What all can we learn from this ancient (and rather unsympathetic) reference to Jesus and the early Christians? Notice, first, that Tacitus reports Christians derived their name from a historical person called Christus (from the Latin), or Christ. He is said to have “suffered the extreme penalty,” obviously alluding to the Roman method of execution known as crucifixion. This is said to have occurred during the reign of Tiberius and by the sentence of Pontius Pilatus. This confirms much of what the Gospels tell us about the death of Jesus.

But what are we to make of Tacitus’ rather enigmatic statement that Christ’s death briefly checked “a most mischievous

superstition," which subsequently arose not only in Judaea, but also in Rome? One historian suggests that Tacitus is here "bearing indirect . . . testimony to the conviction of the early church that the Christ who had been crucified had risen from the grave."[{6}](#) While this interpretation is admittedly speculative, it does help explain the otherwise bizarre occurrence of a rapidly growing religion based on the worship of a man who had been crucified as a criminal.[{7}](#) How else might one explain *that*?

## Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Another important source of evidence about Jesus and early Christianity can be found in the letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he asks Trajan's advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians.[{8}](#) Pliny says that he needed to consult the emperor about this issue because a great multitude of every age, class, and sex stood accused of Christianity.[{9}](#)

At one point in his letter, Pliny relates some of the information he has learned about these Christians:

They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.[{10}](#)

This passage provides us with a number of interesting insights into the beliefs and practices of early Christians. First, we see that Christians regularly met on a certain fixed day for

worship. Second, their worship was directed to Christ, demonstrating that they firmly believed in His divinity. Furthermore, one scholar interprets Pliny's statement that hymns were sung to Christ, *as to a god*, as a reference to the rather distinctive fact that, "unlike other gods who were worshipped, Christ was a person who had lived on earth."[\[11\]](#) If this interpretation is correct, Pliny understood that Christians were worshipping an actual historical person as God! Of course, this agrees perfectly with the New Testament doctrine that Jesus was both God and man.

Not only does Pliny's letter help us understand what early Christians believed about Jesus' *person*, it also reveals the high esteem to which they held His *teachings*. For instance, Pliny notes that Christians *bound themselves by a solemn oath* not to violate various moral standards, which find their source in the ethical teachings of Jesus. In addition, Pliny's reference to the Christian custom of sharing a common meal likely alludes to their observance of communion and the "love feast."[\[12\]](#) This interpretation helps explain the Christian claim that the meal was merely *food of an ordinary and innocent kind*. They were attempting to counter the charge, sometimes made by non-Christians, of practicing "ritual cannibalism."[\[13\]](#) The Christians of that day humbly repudiated such slanderous attacks on Jesus' teachings. We must sometimes do the same today.

## Evidence from Josephus

Perhaps the most remarkable reference to Jesus outside the Bible can be found in the writings of Josephus, a first century Jewish historian. On two occasions, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, he mentions Jesus. The second, less revealing, reference describes the condemnation of one "James" by the Jewish Sanhedrin. This James, says Josephus, was "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ."[\[14\]](#) F.F. Bruce points out how this agrees with Paul's description of James in Galatians 1:19

as “the Lord’s brother.”[{15}](#) And Edwin Yamauchi informs us that “few scholars have questioned” that Josephus actually penned this passage.[{16}](#)

As interesting as this brief reference is, there is an earlier one, which is truly astonishing. Called the “Testimonium Flavianum,” the relevant portion declares:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he . . . wrought surprising feats. . . . He was the Christ. When Pilate . . . condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared . . . restored to life. . . . And the tribe of Christians . . . has . . . not disappeared.[{17}](#)

Did Josephus really write this? Most scholars think the core of the passage originated with Josephus, but that it was later altered by a Christian editor, possibly between the third and fourth century A.D.[{18}](#) But why do they think it was altered? Josephus was not a Christian, and it is difficult to believe that anyone but a Christian would have made some of these statements.[{19}](#)

For instance, the claim that Jesus was a wise man seems authentic, but the qualifying phrase, “*if indeed one ought to call him a man,*” is suspect. It implies that Jesus was more than human, and it is quite unlikely that Josephus would have said *that!* It is also difficult to believe he would have flatly asserted that Jesus was the Christ, especially when he later refers to Jesus as “the so-called” Christ. Finally, the claim that on the third day Jesus appeared to His disciples restored to life, inasmuch as it affirms Jesus’ resurrection, is quite unlikely to come from a non-Christian!

But even if we disregard the questionable parts of this passage, we are still left with a good deal of corroborating

information about the biblical Jesus. We read that he was a wise man who performed surprising feats. And although He was crucified under Pilate, His followers continued their discipleship and became known as Christians. When we combine these statements with Josephus' later reference to Jesus as "the so-called Christ," a rather detailed picture emerges which harmonizes quite well with the biblical record. It increasingly appears that the "biblical Jesus" and the "historical Jesus" are one and the same!

## Evidence from the Babylonian Talmud

There are only a few clear references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled between approximately A.D. 70-500. Given this time frame, it is naturally supposed that earlier references to Jesus are more likely to be historically reliable than later ones. In the case of the Talmud, the earliest period of compilation occurred between A.D. 70-200.[{20}](#) The most significant reference to Jesus from this period states:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy."[{21}](#)

Let's examine this passage. You may have noticed that it refers to someone named "Yeshu." So why do we think this is Jesus? Actually, "Yeshu" (or "Yeshua") is how Jesus' name is pronounced in Hebrew. But what does the passage mean by saying that Jesus "was hanged"? Doesn't the New Testament say he was crucified? Indeed it does. But the term "hanged" can function as a synonym for "crucified." For instance, Galatians 3:13 declares that Christ was "hanged", and Luke 23:39 applies this term to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus.[{22}](#) So the Talmud declares that Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover. But what of the cry of the herald that Jesus was to be stoned? This may simply indicate what the Jewish leaders



were *planning* to do.[{23}](#) If so, Roman involvement changed their plans![{24}](#)

The passage also tells us *why* Jesus was crucified. It claims He practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy! Since this accusation comes from a rather hostile source, we should not be too surprised if Jesus is described somewhat differently than in the New Testament. But if we make allowances for this, what might such charges *imply* about Jesus?

Interestingly, both accusations have close parallels in the canonical gospels. For instance, the charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus cast out demons "by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."[{25}](#) But notice this: such a charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus' miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke's account of the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus of misleading the nation with his teaching.[{26}](#) Such a charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus' powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

## **Evidence from Lucian**

Lucian of Samosata was a second century Greek satirist. In one of his works, he wrote of the early Christians as follows:

The Christians . . . worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . [It] was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live

after his laws. [\[27\]](#)

Although Lucian is jesting here at the early Christians, he does make some significant comments about their founder. For instance, he says the Christians worshipped a *man*, “who introduced their novel rites.” And though this *man’s* followers clearly thought quite highly of Him, He so angered many of His contemporaries with His teaching that He “was crucified on that account.”

Although Lucian does not mention his name, he is clearly referring to Jesus. But what did Jesus teach to arouse such wrath? According to Lucian, he taught that all men are brothers from the moment of their conversion. That’s harmless enough. But what did this conversion involve? It involved denying the Greek gods, worshipping Jesus, and living according to His teachings. It’s not *too* difficult to imagine someone being killed for teaching *that*. Though Lucian doesn’t say so explicitly, the Christian denial of other gods combined with their worship of Jesus implies the belief that Jesus was more than human. Since they denied other gods in order to worship Him, they apparently thought Jesus a greater God than any that Greece had to offer!

Let’s summarize what we’ve learned about Jesus from this examination of ancient non-Christian sources. First, both Josephus and Lucian indicate that Jesus was regarded as wise. Second, Pliny, the Talmud, and Lucian imply He was a powerful and revered teacher. Third, both Josephus and the Talmud indicate He performed miraculous feats. Fourth, Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud, and Lucian all mention that He was crucified. Tacitus and Josephus say this occurred under Pontius Pilate. And the Talmud declares it happened on the eve of Passover. Fifth, there are possible references to the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection in both Tacitus and Josephus. Sixth, Josephus records that Jesus’ followers believed He was the Christ, or Messiah. And finally, both Pliny and Lucian indicate that Christians worshipped Jesus as

God!

I hope you see how this small selection of ancient *non-Christian* sources helps corroborate our knowledge of Jesus from the gospels. Of course, there are many ancient *Christian* sources of information about Jesus as well. But since the historical reliability of the canonical gospels is so well established, I invite you to read *those* for an authoritative "life of Jesus!"

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Edwin Yamauchi, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 82.
5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.
6. N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 19, cited in Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 189-190.
7. Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.
8. Pliny, *Epistles* x. 96, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 25; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II,

X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

11. M. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," in *Gospel Perspectives V*, 354-55, cited in E. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence?", in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. by Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 227, note 66.

12. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

13. Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 28.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* xx. 200, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 36.

15. Ibid.

16. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

17. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64, cited in Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

18. Ibid.

19. Although time would not permit me to mention it on the radio, another version of Josephus' "Testimonium Flavianum" survives in a tenth-century Arabic version (Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 41). In 1971, Professor Schlomo Pines published a study on this passage. The passage is interesting because it lacks most of the questionable elements that many scholars believe to be Christian interpolations. Indeed, "as Schlomo Pines and David Flusser...stated, it is quite plausible that none of the arguments against Josephus writing the original words even applies to the Arabic text, especially since the latter would have had less chance of being censored by the church" (Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194). The passage reads as follows: "At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other

nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders." (Quoted in James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 95, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194).

20. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 202-03.

21. *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhedrin 43a, 281, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

22. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

23. See John 8:58-59 and 10:31-33.

24. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 204. See also John 18:31-32.

25. Matt. 12:24. I gleaned this observation from Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 56.

26. Luke 23:2, 5.

27. Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4., cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 206.

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# If God is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

This is probably the biggest question, and the biggest obstacle to trusting God, in Christianity. It's a legitimate question, and it deserves a thoughtful answer that honors the amount of pain attached to it. Disclosure: I am writing this while beset by the most physical pain I've experienced since post-polio syndrome started attacking my body with the "unholy trinity" of pain, weakness and fatigue. It hurts to stand, it hurts to walk. Every single step.

Why does God allow it? And my pain is *nothing* compared to the horrific suffering of millions around the world. Doesn't He care? Why doesn't He stop it—surely He can. He could stop it all with a single word. So why does He let innocent people—especially children, for heaven's sake—suffer?

We need to put evil and suffering into perspective, and that means the Really Big Picture. Starting before the beginning of time. When all there was, was God: Father, Son and Spirit, engaged in a three-Personed "holy hug" that had no beginning and has no end. A continual celebration of love, adoration, respect, and delight in each other. At some point Father God decided to create mankind and draw us into His circle of love, adopting us as sons (Eph. 1:4-5) and creating a Bride for His eternal Son (Rev. 19:7), a fit companion who would reign with the Lamb (Rev. 22:5).

But God knew that all of human history would unfold between the bookends of the creation of mankind and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. The God of light and life, of love and truth, knew that all those things are found only in Him; He knew that to reject Him meant choosing darkness and death, isolation and deception. He knew that Adam would rebel, that His perfect creation would crash and burn in the Fall, and that everything

would be infected and corrupted by sin. He knew that every human being would be born with a compulsion to reject Him, to live disconnected from Him, independent from Him—something like spiritual HIV+, insuring a death sentence. And sure enough, the mortality rate is still 100%.

God knew all this, and He created us anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Because God is love, He created people to love, and He created people to love Him back. In order for us to choose to return His love, we needed to be free to choose NOT to love Him. God made us with the very real option to say no to Him, so that our yes would mean something. The alternative would be the equivalent to making a phone say, “Good morning, I love you.” The words might be there but there is no heart and no choice behind them—they are nothing more than the result of a programming code. God wanted real and actual love, and that meant that some people He made and dearly loved, could and would say no.

When people say no to God, they not only cut themselves off from relationship with Him, they open the door to all kinds of evil. Some of it comes from sinful human hearts; some of it comes from the demonic realm, angels who also said no to God and became devils. Evil was unleashed by Adam when he disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) and it has been causing havoc, pain and suffering ever since. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that this world plagued by pain and disease, deliberate meanness and selfishness, is not God’s original perfect creation. If it were, God would indeed be a horrible monster. He knew Adam would open the door to all kinds of evil and suffering, and He allowed Adam to do it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Why does God let people suffer?

God uses suffering to cleanse us, to mature us, to burn up

shallowness. (Please see my article [The Value of Suffering.](#)) [He uses pain](#) as His instrument to shape us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). God has no magic wand that instantly transforms us from something broken and dirty (and we are far more broken and dirty than we have any idea) into something whole and beautiful. There is no divine “Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo.”

Instead, the Son left heaven, wrapped Himself in human flesh, and came to earth where He lived a perfect, sinless life. Every day of His earthly life, He suffered as a human, limiting Himself to a body that would get tired, hungry, thirsty and dirty. What the first Adam messed up, Jesus the Second Adam corrected. Where Adam disobeyed the Father, Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). Jesus suffered throughout His incarnation simply because of His limitations as a human, then suffered an unimaginably horrible death through crucifixion, made even worse because He absorbed all the sin of every human being who had ever lived, was living on the earth at that time, and would ever exist in the future. He took our sin into Himself, actually becoming our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that when He died, our sin died with Him. But the Father raised Him from the dead, and He is alive at His Father’s right hand right now in heaven.

This means that God knows what it means to suffer. There is no pain, no suffering we can endure, that God Himself did not experience even more during Jesus’ time on earth. This same suffering God promised, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The Father knew He would send the Son to suffer, and the Son knew that’s what He would leave heaven for.

He did it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

God allows pain and suffering and evil because He has a plan, and He’s working His plan. The end result is that He is redeeming and restoring all the evil, pain and suffering of this sin-sick world. He will set all things right in the end. The last chapter of the Bible makes it clear that there is a



happy ending to what is NOT a fairy tale. What started out as a Three-Personed holy hug of the Father, Son and Spirit loving each other while still remaining one God, will be a hugely enlarged circle of love that includes millions, possibly billions of people God made in His image, marked “Mine,” and drew into the divine circle to love and be loved forever.

At that point I believe we will agree, as we look back on evil, pain and suffering on earth, that it was so, so worth it.

This blog post originally appeared at [If God Is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?](#) on July 15, 2014

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## **Law and Grace: Combating the American Heresy of Pelagianism**

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

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

A young college student once told me that a pastor’s son argued with him that no religion—and especially not Christianity—was about faith in any God, but rather the good works that we do for others. Christianity, so the preacher’s boy said, concerned doing to others what we would have done to

us; it does not even matter if God exists or not, only the good we do for people counts—philanthropy, morality and being a good person matters most, not faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

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

This all sounds like common sense, but amounts to a denial of the central Christian belief in salvation by grace through faith alone. If we are not sinners by nature but only by choice than we can conceivably make more good choices than evil ones in order to redeem ourselves and then there would be no need for faith or a savior. Good works and keeping either the internal law of conscience or the old Mosaic Law would suffice.

## **Salvation by Grace Through Faith Alone**

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

sticks for salvation.

Christians continually misunderstand and misuse the Law, thus placing themselves and others in bondage to a *de facto* works salvation mentality. The Apostle Paul argued that we did not begin with the Spirit in our salvation only to be perfected by “the flesh” in the works of the Law (Galatians 3: 3). Paul repeatedly identified legalism as a work of the flesh or sinful human nature and worldliness. He spoke of “the elemental principles of the world” (Galatians. 4: 3 and Col. 2: 8, 20) not as secularism, or so called “worldly” practices such as dancing, smoking or movie attendance, as Christians do today. Rather, worldliness according to these passages was the religiosity of the Judaizing heresy that imposed legal restrictions on believers such as circumcision (as seen in *Galatians*) or dietary restrictions, festivals and Sabbath observance or angel worship (in *Colossians*). Paul rejected his great religious inheritance, status and fame as a Pharisee, considering it all a work of the flesh, so that his righteousness would not derive from the Law, but from Christ (Philippians 3: 1–9). Religious legalism represents as great a threat to grace in the New Testament than any libertine license for sin.

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

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

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

The Mosaic Law was given to Israel on Mount Sinai as their Constitution and guide to holiness; it was never capable of bringing eternal salvation, but served as a teacher to the preservation of Israel in the Promised Land while demonstrating God’s righteous character. It was a temporary operating system, so to speak, that was necessary in order to display human sinfulness and point to humanity’s need for grace. But, crucially, it was destined to pass away or be retired once the plan of God came to fruition in the Life of Christ (Galatians 3). It showed only humanity’s guilt, yet foreshadowed in its practices the promise of God’s ultimate work of grace (Hebrews 8: 5; 10: 1). Once grace arrived in the work of Christ, the Law was no longer necessary (Hebrews 8: 6). The Law only pointed to human need for grace or the presence of sin. The Law shows people their unrighteousness. God demonstrates his mercy only after explaining and portraying his righteousness. God gives the Law first to demonstrate sin and *then* sends his Son to reveal His love and grace.

The Mosaic Law functions similarly to natural law or general revelation in demonstrating humanity’s need for God, the absence of God from the human heart (Romans 1 & 2). The Law and general revelation both perform a preparatory role: either telling humanity it does not know God, as with general

revelation, or revealing humanity's sin, as with the Law (Romans 3). They give no saving knowledge, but function only to condemn and never to save. Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.

## **One Law, Indivisible, With Grace for All**

There is only one Law, which must be accepted as a whole. The unity of the Law applies equally to either its total fulfillment in Christ or to the possibility that the Law remains operative after Christ. The Law cannot be subdivided into different sections such as moral, ceremonial and civil that were applicable before Christ and those sections still applicable after Christ. Any theological approach to the Law that states its partial effectiveness misunderstands the unity of the Law and the work of Christ that has already fulfilled the Law in its entirety. One either keeps the whole Law or does not (Galatians 3: 10; James 2: 10; Matthew 5: 19; Deuteronomy 27: 1; 28: 1; 30: 8). Likewise, either Christ fulfilled the Law or he did not. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say the Law was partially fulfilled in Christ, leaving the Church to fulfill the rest. A change in one aspect of the Law, such as the Old Testament Priesthood, necessitates the inauguration of a new law and not merely a partial change in the old law (Hebrews 7: 12). Paul argued against the *Judaizers*, who imposed legal restrictions on Christians, that if they accepted one part of the Law they were "under obligation to keep the whole Law" (Galatians 5: 3).

Any return to the Law rejects faith in Christ and even creates a hindrance to the progression of the plan of God in history. The Book of Hebrews gives a dire warning to all who return to these former elements: "For if we go on sinning willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment.... Anyone who set aside the Law of

Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has insulted the spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10: 26–29).

## **Does Retirement of the Law Mean God Changed?**

The problem many express with notion of the Law's retirement is based on this conclusion: God cannot change, so how can He, in effect, repeal his own law? The Law was given in order to maintain Israel as a separate people who would act as a conduit through whom God would send his Messiah to reach the whole world. "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (Galatians 4: 4). *The Law was by its very nature temporary and conditional to Israel as an operative system in the history of God's plan of universal redemption.* Once the Law and Israel achieved their purposes, or were "fulfilled" in Christ they became obsolete (Hebrews 8: 13). The Law had an expiration date, a shelf life that only lasted until Messiah arrived. The Law played a preparatory role for the coming of Christ; it never had the power to save, but only to condemn in identifying and demonstrating human sin and inadequacies. Its function was to ready mankind for salvation. The Law is good and holy, but it is also obsolete and incomplete (Romans 7; Galatians 3).

## **Good News! The Law is Fulfilled in Christ**

The Law was not abolished, repealed or revamped in any way in the new age of grace. Jesus himself says that he did not come to destroy [*katalyō*] or subvert the Law, but to fulfill [*plēroō*] it (Matthew 5: 17), which means to complete, to finish, accomplish or expire. Paul repeats Jesus' declaration by stating that "Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law,"

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

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

Although, the Law as a binding system has been retired in the plan of God's redemption, it serves an important role in the advice and instruction readers learn from it. The Law offers examples of righteousness and models of holiness. Paul noted that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Romans 15: 4). He adds that the history of

Israel serves as an example of learning for the Church today (I Corinthians 10: 6) and that "All Scripture is ...profitable for teaching ... and for training in righteousness" (I Timothy 3: 16). The Church looks back to the Law for guidance and for the meaning of holiness and righteousness, but never applies the Law in the same way as Israel did as a civil nation. The New Testament writers use the Law as examples of righteousness in the reiteration of the Ten Commandments (Romans 13: 8–10; James 2: 8–11). The Law must be used "lawfully" (I Timothy 1: 8) as instruction and not as a binding operating system.

To argue for subdivision in the Law such as ceremonial, dietary, moral, sacrificial, etc., in essence denies the Law's instructive capacities today. The Law is either obsolete in its entirety or it is operative in its entirety and if it is obsolete yet still instructive, it is instructive in its entirety today. The Law has not been abrogated, as if God somehow made a mistake. Again it was fulfilled, and hence has accomplished its purpose; its *telos* and reason for existence has been realized. The Law was then retired; it serves now only to instruct in righteousness and to demonstrate sinfulness.

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



one.

Without enforcement of the Law there is, in reality, no Law. The Church cannot honestly say it is somehow under the obligations of the Law if also does not keep its enforcement. This is where the entire operative approach to the Law breaks apart into utter incoherence in relation to the New Testament principle of grace. The penalty for most infractions against the Law was death by stoning and was often administered by a civil and religious authority (Deuteronomy 17). Since the Church does not inherit Israel's civil authority, enforcement of the Mosaic Law becomes impossible [21]. (See my article on the prophetic voice of the Church [here](#).)

As the premiere Law of all time, greater than the Code of Hammurabi, greater than the Qur'an, greater than Roman law (Galatians 3:21), the Mosaic Law offers itself as instruction and example for individual morality and civil society, but requires no uncontested obligation regarding its adoption and enforcement. The Law ceases to be a legalistic code that must be enforced to the letter upon pain of death. Instead, it *speaks* as the Word of God. *It now brings life instead of death.* In Christ "the ministry of death" transforms into "the ministry of the Spirit" and life" (2 Corinthians 3).

## **A New Commandment**

Though the Law was fulfilled, accomplished and expired in Christ, and its requirements and penalties no longer directly apply today. This does not mean the Church lives lawlessly and without moral standards. The fulfillment of the Law in Christ means the fulfillment of the Law in his Body, the Church. Jesus and both the Apostles Paul and James stated that the commandment of love fulfills the Law (Matthew 22: 37–40; Mark 12: 29–31; Romans 13: 8–10; Galatians 5: 14; James 2: 8). "Love ... is the fulfillment [*plērōma*] of the Law" (Romans 13: 10) The Church, as well as Christ, bring a completion and conclusion to the Law. Jesus left the Church with a new

commandment of love that fulfills the old Law. Just as the old Law marked the distinction of Israel as a holy people from the rest of the pagan nations (Deuteronomy 28: 1–2), so the new commandment of love distinguishes the Church from a hostile world system: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 14: 34, 35).

The old Law was not a failure, so that God had to begin again with a New Commandment of Love. The Law was as Paul said, “weak ... through the flesh,” (Romans 8: 3), meaning it was simply incapable of producing anything other than the recognition of sin and condemnation (Romans 7: 7–13). It could never save and transform humanity. For that purpose God sent his Son and “condemned sin ...in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled [*plēroō*, completed, finished or accomplished] in us who do not walk according to the flesh [sinful human nature] but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8: 4).

Because believers now have the Holy Spirit, they are new creations (2 Corinthians 5: 17) and the Law is accomplished in them. This does not mean Christians live perfectly as Christ did, but that there are no moral or legal requirements that they must meet as a sign of their acceptance by God; instead of living up to a standard, they live out of the sufficiency of Christ. They are guided by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the New Commandment of Love, also called “the law of the Spirit” (Romans 8: 2), “the law of faith” (Romans 3: 27), “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6: 2) and “the royal law” (James 2: 8), reflecting the image of God in Christ. *Jesus did not leave a legal code to regulate every aspect of life, like Moses; instead he gave the Church an orientation of love and freedom.* Law compels obedience through fear of punishment. It dominates the individual’s will so that his choices are not his own. Grace inspires obedience through the revelation of God’s love;

“the goodness of God leads to repentance” (Romans 2: 4). Law is for the immature or those who cannot act responsibly without it. They need to be told what to do in external and institutional codes. Grace is for the mature who act according to the Law of the Spirit or the spirit of the Law residing internally in every believer. They live by the Spirit at a higher standard of personal accountability to God and not according to the letter of the Law (Matthew 19). Law is for the lawless, not the righteous (I Tim 5: 5-10).

## **The Internal Law of the Spirit**

The Law of the Spirit expresses the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that the Law will be written on the hearts of God’s people in a new covenant after God fills them with his Spirit and forgives their sin (Jeremiah 31: 31–34; Ezekiel 36: 24–27; Hebrews 8: 7–13; 12: 24). Believers are not accountable to the Law, but may approach God through Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest and Mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2: 5; Hebrews 4: 14; 7: 18-19). Grace supplies believers with a greater righteousness and accessibility directly to God, in contrast to the Law of Moses, because as grace fulfills all the requirements of the Law, it also provides both personal transformation and purity of heart through faith. It is not enough to simply *not* commit murder or adultery. One must not harbor hate or lust also (Matthew 5). The Law—is now internalized in believers through the Holy Spirit.

The new Law of the Spirit (i.e., the Law of Love) continues where the old Law left off. But this new law is different from the old because it can only be accepted by faith, a committed trust in the unseen Word of God (2 Corinthians 4: 16–5:7; Hebrews 11: 1–12: 3) as a gift of God’s grace, which makes the old Law a law of works, not a law of faith (Romans 3: 27). Abraham understood that “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Anyone living righteously knew it even when they were

under the Law—that keeping the Law was impossible, requiring grace (Romans 4). The Law required moral and legal perfection, complete and total obedience or works, requiring human effort in order to achieve acceptance with God. Any attempt to work one's way back to God on the basis of keeping the Law disqualifies one from salvation by grace through faith (Romans 3–5). “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Galatians 2: 21).

Christians are not justified by grace through faith, only to be sanctified by works either the works of the Law or any other code of conduct. Theologically, Evangelicals typically divide the term salvation into three stages: *justification*, a positional salvation that can never be revoked; *sanctification*, a lifestyle that reflects justification, and *glorification*, the end result of salvation when believers are restored to the complete image of God in the *eschaton*[\[3\]](#). The Church often struggles the most with the middle stage of sanctification, asserting the need for a code of conduct as many Evangelicals do or even a sacramental merit system as Roman Catholics accept that measures the believer's progress and growth towards Christlikeness. Although most Evangelicals will hotly deny that they are setting up a new works salvation system in their codes, the practical effects are the same: justification is by faith and sanctification is by works.

## **The Ontology of Salvation**

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

there was someone who kept it perfectly, such as Saul of Tarsus (Philippians 3: 6) .

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

The human condition remains so stricken with sin that only a divine intervention will save people from condemnation. No amount of good deeds—even if they were perfect—could erase the curse of sin inherited from the First Adam (Romans 5: 12–21 ). *Salvation must be ontological and not simply moral*. There must be a change in *being* and not merely a change in *doing*. This means there must be a change in the spiritual condition of people and not simply a moral or behavioral change. God does not forgive sin without compensation for sin. Salvation requires more than just a divine act of will to rescue humanity, which then translates to morality and law (or contemporary manifestations of *moralism* and *legalism*). This bears out in the New Testament in the struggle between law and grace or works and faith. One position focuses on *ontology* (the transformation of the spiritual condition or essence) and the other on morality (human effort or works). Salvation focuses on either God or man; either God saves humanity by grace or humanity contributes through its merits to its own forgiveness and restoration.

Human nature tends to self-righteousness and belief in its own ability to earn the grace of God expressed in morality and law, or what Paul called “works.” Morality means the choices people make based on what they think is right or wrong. Law,

that is “Policy” in human terms, is the morality of a few people enforced on the majority, through institutional and legally binding codes of behavior. The modern world has adopted a humanistic perspective that sees humanity as preeminent, not God; it has abandoned ontology and metaphysics.<sup>[4]</sup> In lieu of metaphysics, the modern world uses morality and law as a guide to life; it creates an understanding of God in its own moral image as glorified law-giver and not the Spirit who changes hearts, minds and lives. Thus Christianity and all religion are reduced to morality as opposed to faith, which is irrelevant to the modern world.

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

## **Moralism: The American Heresy**

The common sense approach to religion in America argues that

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

Theologically speaking, most of the American Church has followed the classic heresy known as Pelagianism,[\[5\]](#) a belief that denies the inherent sinful condition. Pelagius the fourth century monk and arch opponent of St. Augustine argued that original sin does not exist as the guilt humanity inherits from the First Adam and that Adam's sin was his own. The human race cannot be held accountable for a sin they did not commit. People are born innocent into a corrupt environment and only become sinful after they have sinned. On the surface this doctrine appears rational and fair, but cuts the heart out of the principle of grace and throws all religion back into a legalist and moralist mode. Without a notion of original sin, today called "radical evil," or "total depravity," or simply the "sinful human nature," it makes perfect sense that the way back to God is through being a good person or moral reformation. As theologian Paul Tillich noted "[Pelagianism] ... is always effective in us when we try to force God down to ourselves. This is what we usually call 'moralism,'... Pelagius said that good and evil are performed by us; they are not given [or an ontic condition, meaning we are not born into a state of sin; rather we become sinners through our own misdeeds or sins]. If this is true then religion is in danger of being transformed into morality."[\[6\]](#)

The principle of grace advocated by the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine and the Reformers radically opposes moralism and makes salvation a matter of a divine intervention in the human condition that can be received only by faith. Works do nothing to alter the human condition of sin and condemnation. No moral or legal remedy exists that will change our basic sinful

selves. Moral transformation (works) follows faith, but has no causal effect on salvation or loss of salvation. What God gives in grace he will not revoke (Rom 8: 26-39; 11: 29). Grace is not an excuse or license for sin. Those who argue that way simply do not understand grace and its transforming effects on moral character, nor have they ever participated in it (Rom 6). “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6: 14)!

## Endnotes

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

2. Lawrence Terlizzese, *Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics*, Probe Ministries, 2012, [www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/](http://www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/).

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

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

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

6. Ibid., 125.

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# Expanding the Biblical Worldview of Christians in Myanmar

*Don Closson, who has taught Christian worldview on several continents, recently returned from Myanmar, which has in recent years been oppressed heavily by an atheistic regime. Representing his church Christ Fellowship in McKinney (TX), he shared with pastors and students a biblical perspective on world missions and how the Church there is both historically blessed and currently in a good position to reach their own nation (formerly known as Burma) with the gospel.*

Details of a trip can begin to fade even as the effects of jet lag seem to grow stronger. Fortunately, I do remember many wonderful aspects of my whirlwind eleven-day trip with friend and pastor Ken Stoneking to Myanmar (the U.S. still insists on calling it Burma), one of the poorest and most oppressed countries in Asia.

## **Praise God for a Fruitful Trip**

This was my most successful cross-cultural teaching experience to date. I say that for several reasons. First, the topic was timely and relevant to my audience of pastors and students at the Mandalay Bible Seminary. I spoke on God's Kingdom as it relates to world missions by breaking the topic down into four parts: the theological, historical, cultural and strategic perspectives. After I finished teaching the 20 hour class over five days, my host told me that he had been struggling with this very topic, particularly how to motivate the church leaders in Myanmar to play a greater role in missions. He expressed that many churches in Myanmar have an inward perspective and needed help seeing that believers have an obligation to be a blessing to those around us. He told me

that my talks gave him a number of ideas to develop further after our visit.

## **Myanmar's Uniqueness**

My preparation for this class increased both my own understanding and appreciation for the task of world missions. As I put the lessons together, I got more and more excited about my opportunity to share with the pastors and students. I realized that they live in a strategic place to reach a part of the world limited to Americans. Myanmar is in the global *10/40 window* that defines the least evangelized segment of the globe. In fact, its capital city Yangon is listed as one of the 100 gateway cities to this 10/40 region, the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitudes, according to The Joshua Project. The population of the world is growing more Asian every year and Myanmar is centrally located to impact China, Thailand, and India!

## **Connecting the Dots...**

A serendipity was "connecting the dots" as I researched the relationship between the Church in Myanmar and the early Reformation—going all the way back to John Wycliffe in the 1300s. Wycliffe challenged the authority of the Pope and the refusal of the Church to put the Bible in of the language of the common people. His followers were known as Lollards, and they preached anti-clerical and biblically-centered reforms.

Jon Huss read the teachings of Wycliffe in the 15th century and attempted to reform the church in Bohemia and the adjacent area called Moravia. Gaining a wide following, the Hussites influenced the region around Prague, Czech Republic, including a group which became known as the Moravian church. Huss was eventually burned at the stake in the center of Old Town Square in Prague for challenging the official doctrines of the Catholic Church. However, the Moravian Brethren continued on and became a powerful force for evangelism in the 18th and

19th centuries.

Evangelist and church leader Count Zinzendorf was at the center of this movement during the late 1700s. He traveled to America and England meeting with Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening that brought revival to both England and the Colonies in the 1730s and 40s.

In 1806 a group of college students at Williams College prayed that God would again bring revival to the country, sparking a movement among college students known as the Haystack Prayer Revival. These five students would help influence a young man named Adoniram Judson to commit his life to missions. Judson set sail for India with his wife in 1812, but the East India Company would not allow them to enter because they feared that missionaries would stir up the Hindus. Taking the first boat East, Judson arrived in Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1813. After six years he had his first convert and when he died at age 62, after spending 38 years in Myanmar, it was estimated that there were over 200,000 Christians in the country. Judson was the first to translate the Bible into the Burmese language, a translation that was so good that it is still used today and preferred over recent translations because it is more theologically conservative.

## **More Dots**

The day after I left, an earthquake hit Myanmar. Thankfully, God spared the Mandalay Bible Seminary. Then our president visited for the first time in recognition of the political changes occurring there. Please pray for the Christians in this strategic country. They are standing boldly and are ready to be used of the Lord for the Great Commission.

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# Jesus Christ Superstar

## Kanye West vs. John Lennon

“Who do men say that I am?” (Matt 16:16)

In 1966, rock star John Lennon said the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” Lennon made the statement in the context of his predication about the demise of Christianity; “Christianity will go,” he said. “It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first, rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary.” Lennon’s failed predication about the demise of Christianity, like so many since the eighteenth century, grossly underestimated the enormous appeal of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and everyone wants a piece of him. Recent music artists tend to disagree with Lennon. The pop diva Kesha sings, “Got Jesus on my necklace.” Lady Gaga sings, “The three men I’m a serve my whole life is my Daddy and Nebraska and Jesus Christ.” In his acclaimed single, “Jesus Walks,” a sort of Hip Hop gospel song, Kanye West raps and preaches:

*I ain't here to argue about his facial features  
Or here to convert atheists into believers  
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers  
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus.*

It is very reassuring to have Jesus on your team. There is a principle in marketing called “borrowed authority” where a spokesman such as an athlete or movie star endorses a product. Jesus represents the ultimate superstar whose intrinsic authority is borrowed to support every kind of religious and

social movement. Even the apparent enemies of faith such as Secular Humanists claim to accept Jesus' social ethics of peace and equality. Today cults and religions, Christian and non-Christian alike, all claim Jesus as their own or as a great teacher or prophet. Islam claims Jesus as a prophet and teacher of Islam who preceded Mohammad and predicted his coming.

The various images of Jesus may error in one of two ways, either in denying his full deity or neglecting his complete humanity. The biblical presentation shows Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became flesh (John 1). He is both Son of God and Son of Man. Traditional theology calls this the God/man union. This means Jesus is both fully God and fully man. This unity must be retained if we are to follow the Jesus of the Bible and not another Jesus invented by the spirit of the age to lend credibility to a given cause or religious movement.

Jesus once asked the apostle Peter, "Who do men say that I am?" Peter offered a very pluralistic answer: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The idea that Jesus was a prophet is not wrong, just incomplete. When Christ asked Peter again, "Who do you say that I am?" he replied that Jesus was not just another great religious leader, but the incarnate savior when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13-16).

## **The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man**

The emphasis since the Renaissance in Western thought has been on humanism. This means a stress in the arts and sciences on human dignity, freedom, and beauty as well as a renewed interest in the natural world as opposed to a transcendent emphasis on divinity or the authority of the church and the Bible as in the Middle Ages. Every age tends to portray Christ

in its own image. In the Middle Ages, Christ is painted as King, divine and regal such as Pantocrator, ruler of all, from the sixth century. Today our view of Jesus reflects the humanist trend from Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1498) all the way to the *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman (1940), which is by far the most popular portrait of Christ in history.

The famous German poet Goethe noted the sensual power of *The Last Supper*, which represents “‘the boldest attempt to adhere to nature, while, at the same time, the object is supernatural,’ with the result that ‘the majesty, the uncontrolled will, the power and might of the Deity’ were not expressed.”<sup>{1}</sup>

This represents the modern liberal Jesus, which has been popular since the nineteenth century. This view shows Jesus as a great man and moral teacher, a faith healer who preached social reform, the Son of Man, but not the Son of God. Modern culture tends to think about Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived rather than the Son of God.

This is also true of “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” of the nineteenth century debunked by Albert Schweitzer as modern people portraying Jesus in their own image as a good ethical man, who did good deeds.<sup>{2}</sup> Despite the fact that the search for the Historical Jesus was shown to be biased towards modern views, it continues in movements like the Jesus Seminar and in the famous Baur-Ehrman thesis. Both argue for a historical Jesus who is not in the Gospels but is thought to be the earliest Jesus. They baptize Christ in contemporary culture by arguing that alternative views of Jesus preceded orthodoxy in the earliest Christian community. This presents another attempt to understand Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The latest quest seeks greater diversity in our social ethics by presenting various views of Jesus.

A very human Jesus is not necessarily a false view, except if we say this is all that he was. So Jesus is the greatest man

that ever lived, but he was more than that as well. He was also the incarnate God.

## **The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message**

There is no difference between the ancient world and the modern one concerning Jesus' star power. Yesterday's Gnostics, like today's, wanted the credibility of having Jesus attached to their movement without really accepting him as their Lord and Savior, once again tapping into his borrowed authority. Gnosticism was a second century heretical belief that has experienced a considerable revival since the discovery of some of their lost documents in 1945. Gnostics believed that the material world is basically evil, created by a demiurge [Ed. Note: "A supernatural being imagined as creating or fashioning the world in subordination to the Supreme Being, and sometimes regarded as the originator of evil," Dictionary.com] that departed from the Pleroma (the Gnostic view of God). The divine spark, or a piece of God, however, remains trapped in our physical bodies that can only be released through secret knowledge of divine messengers like Jesus.

A problem arises theologically when Gnostics reject the belief that Jesus had no physical body because the material world is evil. He only appeared as a man, like a phantom or hologram, but was really a divine spirit. Jesus was not a savior, but a teacher. Gnostics did not believe in salvation, meaning one is saved from sin by grace through faith. Instead, Gnostics taught enlightenment or the impartation of knowledge. People are not sinners, only ignorant of the divine spark within them.

Who was Jesus to the Gnostics? He was not the divine Son of God made flesh, but an elevated spirit being, an emanation sent to give special knowledge of how to ascend back to God. One of the greatest artistic expressions of Gnosticism comes

from the modern Surrealist painter Salvador Dali in his depiction of Jesus in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), which shows a transparent effeminate Jesus as a sort of exalted spirit god administering the communion table. Here Jesus is divine, but not human.

Modern Gnostics like Dan Brown, some Feminists theologians and Neo-Gnostic churches are attracted to the apparent androgyny, diversity, and collusion of opposites in the Gnostic concept of God, which depicted the emanations in the Pleroma as both masculine and feminine. This leads to the notion that Gnosticism was more tolerant of differences and individualistic and offered a prominent role for women because its theological nomenclature spoke of "God the Father" and "God the Mother." [\[3\]](#)

Yet the Gnostic belief system is antithetical to the entire tenor of the modern materialistic worldview. Most Neo-Gnostics adopt the psychological aspects of Gnosticism that appeal to the individual's sense of superiority to the world. It is the world that is fallen in Gnosticism, not the individual. It is the creator who is at fault, not people. The unacceptable metaphysical aspect of Gnosticism to a modern materialist worldview makes it obvious that Neo-Gnostics are grasping at straws. They are looking for anything to validate their belief in diversity, androgyny, and individual superiority. What better person to turn to than the leading cultural figure of all time, Jesus Christ?

## **Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel**

Another major error in the history of Christian thought is named for its major proponent Arius (250-336). Arianism believes that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was a created being like an angel. In fact he is the chief of all the angels. Arius' famous line states "there was a time when he was not." [\[4\]](#) This means Jesus was a created being. All



orthodox theology and teaching roundly rejects this view because it compromises the deity of Christ. In an effort to preserve the radical oneness of God, Arianism accomplishes the opposite by falling into polytheism. There is not one God, but two. The Father made the Son and the Son in turn made the rest of the world. It is similar to the modern view that says Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived with the added dimension of being like God but not equal to God. He is a god. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in their understanding of Jesus, even thinking that the term "Son of God" suggests an inferior station to the Father. The term "Son of God" means Jesus is equal to the Father (John 5:18). The Arian heresy was revived by some Unitarians in the modern Age, Isaac Newton being the most famous, but has been especially embraced by the cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses who argue vigorously for the idea that Jesus is not God but a created being.

The famous theologian Athanasius (298-373) argued that our view of Jesus must be tied to our salvation. If we get our view of Jesus wrong we will also misunderstand salvation by grace. Only God creates and only God saves, but it is humanity that must suffer the penalty of sin. But because people are unable to offer the sacrifice for sin God must offer it himself in human form to save us. The dual nature of Christ solves this problem by making Christ the perfect sacrifice as the God/man. An angel is not capable of offering a sacrifice for sin. This is essentially what the book of Hebrews says: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs" (Heb. 1:3, 4 cf. Heb. 2:14-18).

# **New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master**

The New Age Jesus is very popular today. This is the belief that Jesus is one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, an "ascended master" much like Buddha or Krishna. Jesus is not the unique Son of God but one of many divine incarnations. He does not come to deliver us from sin but to enlighten us. He came to show us how we can achieve God-consciousness or to help us realize we are God within. This is similar to Gnostic idea of a divine spark left in humanity after the creation of the world.

Because of this the New Age is often confused with Gnosticism. There are correlations, but there are also substantial differences between the two. New Age thinking is pantheistic. This means God equals the all pervasive force of the universe, which makes it more happy and world-friendly as expressed in the modern ecology movements that find God in nature. Gnosticism is not pantheistic, but radically dualistic; the world is evil and the individual is good but trapped in the material world. Gnosticism tends to be dark and foreboding with other worldly hopes of escape and ascension. New Age tends to have hope in the current historical continuum of change. There is a New Age of Aquarius dawning right around the corner. We don't find that optimism in Gnosticism.

The New Age version of Jesus expresses another aspect of Jesus' popularity among non-Christian religions as well as spiritual but not traditionally religious Americans. Like Gnosticism, it absorbs Jesus into its belief system, but it also acquires greater credibility for itself by adopting Jesus. Most of the popular views of Jesus are a way of accepting a semblance of spirituality without really committing oneself to the message of Christ as the only way to the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The great offense today in Christianity is given by our belief

in the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God. Every alternative view of Jesus compromises this central idea, making Jesus one of many ways to God. The enormous popularity of Jesus need not create confusion. The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to the Father. John Lennon and the Beatles have been relegated to the oldies station, but Jesus is still here and more popular than ever. We need to help refocus the culture's acceptance of Jesus as the greatest man and religious leader with the biblical message of salvation that says Jesus is the incarnate Word sent to save us from sin and restore us to the Father.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 146-147.
2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillian, 1964).
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Bernard Simon, *The Essence of the Gnostics* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2004), 203-220.
4. Quoted in Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 28.

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## What is Technology?

*Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese uncovers a disturbing new view of technology: not as neutral, but a way of life that objectifies everything, including people.*

## The Neutrality View

Most people take a favorable view towards technological progress; new cars, cell phones and computers – what's not to like? They embrace technological innovation as a plus despite the suspicions of questionable things like cloning, genetic engineering and nuclear weapons. But what is technology anyway? Do we really understand this all-embracing phenomenon directing human history? We often take for granted that we think we know the answer when in fact the meaning of the greatest social mover of all times remains elusive. When it comes to defining technology we are beset with the problem of defining more than just a word, but a concept and whole way of life and worldview.



The typical definition of technology these days says technology is neutral, suggesting that technology is nothing more than tools that people use as needed. Technology is a means to an end and nothing more. All objects are separate and disconnected. They are neutral and value-free, right? Tables, chairs, and light fixtures have nothing to do with each other and express no values in themselves and are completely determined by our use. They are simply objects at our disposal and present no moral problems so long as we use them for good. We can pick up a hammer and use it, then place it back in the tool box when finished. The hammer has appropriate and inappropriate uses. Hitting nails into wood is one of the acceptable uses of a hammer; using it to play baseball is not acceptable. So long as we act as good moral agents we use our technology rightly, or so we think. This definition is so widely accepted that we have trouble ever questioning it. When faced with morally questionable uses of technology we fall back on this old cliché: “technology is neutral,” and that settles all disputes. We are all familiar with this popular view and embrace it to some extent. The problem is not that the cliché is so simple or popular, but that it is so wrong.

Philosophers have been telling us for decades now that the neutrality of technology definition is wrong and dangerous because it blinds us to the true nature of technology.

## The Holistic View

The second view of the nature of technology, held mainly by philosophers, we call the “holistic view.” This view states that the “neutral view” is false because people hold to it as a means of justifying every type of technology. The neutrality view blinds us to the true nature of technology, which is not value-free. The lack of understanding regarding the true nature of technology creates a serious problem for a society so heavily influenced by technological development. As sociologist Rudi Volti says, “This inability to understand technology and perceive its effects on our society and on ourselves is one of the greatest, if most subtle, problems of an age that has been so heavily influenced by technological change.”<sup>[1]</sup> Technology is understood as a social system. We can also call it a worldview, a philosophy of life that sees all things as objects, including people. Instead of defining technology as disparate tools unconnected to each other, philosophers have suggested a more comprehensive definition that says technology does not mean neutral objects ready for use at our convenience, but a way of life that informs and controls everything we do. In other words, technology is a belief system with its own worldview and agenda—more like a religion than a hammer.

This belief system is often called the *essence of technology* or *spirit of technology* and cannot be seen in technological objects because we cannot see the entire system by looking at individual parts. We must grasp the spiritual essence before we can understand its technical parts. The “neutrality view” looks only at parts rather than the whole and misses technology’s true nature. This is a lot like looking at the tires of your car or its engine parts and thinking you now

understand a car from seeing separate pieces of it and never seeing how the whole thing fits together.

The holistic view understands technology as a way of life and spiritual reality that shapes all our thinking. Philosopher Martin Heidegger gives the example of how the Rhine River exists not as a river, but as a source for electricity. Everything becomes stuff ready for usefulness.[{2}](#)

Technology really means an interconnected system rather than a neutral tool. The neutral definition blinds us to the true nature of technology and prevents us from mastering it. Heidegger argued that “we are delivered over to [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.”[{3}](#)

## **Technology as Spirituality**

The neutrality argument reassures us that we remain in control of our means rather than our means controlling us. It does not allow us to find the essence of technology in everyday technological objects such as cars, computers, or screw drivers and baseball bats; rather, technology is a way of life and thought that creates a universal system. Technology means the grand accumulation of all the different technological parts into a global system.

Technology is a system of interlocking systems. As philosopher Jacques Ellul said, “It is the aggregate of these means that produces technical civilization.”[{4}](#) Technology is our modern frame of reference that speaks of the profoundly spiritual and not the strictly technical. If we look at individual everyday technologies we will miss it. Instead we must see past the common objects to the larger global system that comprises technology as a social process. In the technological system

both humanity and nature have no separate standing or value outside of technical usefulness. People are simply resources to be used and discarded as needed.

This view reveals the depths to which technology shapes our thinking by informing us and conforming us into the image of the machine, which represents the greatest example of technological thinking. Everything is understood as a machine and should function like a machine including the government, the school, the church and you! Bureaucracy is a social machine.

The machine is predictable. It has no freedom. It follows mechanical steps, or linear logic. Step one leads to step two, and so forth. Any deviation from its programming causes chaos and possible break down, which is why the machine is the worst possible analogy for human beings to follow. Yet this is the basis of the entire modern conception of life.[{5}](#) People are not machines that can be programmed; to adopt this conception reverses the role between humanity and its machines, making people conform to the image of the machine rather than vice versa. Machines are our slaves. They do what we tell them to do. They have no will, feelings or desires. Philosophers tell us that the natural relationship between people and machines is in a process of reversal so that we are becoming slaves to technology. We may control our individual use of technology but no one as of yet controls the entire system.[{6}](#)

## **Neutrality as Modern Myth**

Nothing can be explained by the neutrality argument, not even the meaning of "neutrality." It is simply not possible for any technology to be neutral; even the most primitive tools such as fire or stone axes take the form of their designers. Every technology bears inherent values of purpose and goals. Fire has value for a particular reason, to clear the land, cook food, keep people warm and ward off dangerous animals. By

their very design, all inventions and tools reflects our values and human nature. Philosopher of Science Jacob Bronowski argued that "to quarrel with technology is to quarrel with the nature of man."<sup>[7]</sup> Technology is an extension of ourselves and expresses human nature, which is never entirely good or bad, but ambivalent. Our technology reflects who we are and nothing more; it is not divine, it will not save the human race; but neither is it animal, but fully human, whose nature is always ambiguous, capable of great acts of kindness and mercy as well as cruelty and evil. People can be self-sacrificial and giving and self-destructive and greedy. There will always be good and bad effects to our inventions. They are a double edged sword that cuts both ways and it is our responsibility to discern between the two.

The modern bias in favor of neutrality reveals our protectionist tendencies towards all things technological. How is it that sinful people can produce morally neutral technology? We would not say that about art. "Oh! All art is morally neutral! It is all a matter of how you use it!" Yet the same creative forces go into producing technology as art. Is there anything neutral about the works of Caravaggio, Da Vinci or Picasso? Why then should there be anything neutral about Facebook or MX missiles?

This appears simple enough, but as modern people addicted to our latest toys and novelties we have difficulty admitting we may have a problem. We don't like to think that too much Facebook might be causing young people to be further isolated from the community because they are more accustomed to relate electronically than in person, or that email actually reduces our ability to communicate because of the absence of tone of voice, body language, eye contact and personal presence. TV and film may have a surreal effect on its message, giving it a dream like quality rather than communicating realism.



# Controlling Technology

The solution is not to abandon any of the incredible inventions of the modern age, but to recognize their limits. It is the sign of wisdom that we understand our limits and work within them. We should proceed along a two tiered path of questioning and the application of values. Ellul said that "It is not a question of getting rid of [technology], but by an act of freedom, of transcending it."[\[8\]](#) The act of questioning is the first act of freedom; by becoming aware of the problem we can assert a measure of freedom and control. Through critical questioning we recognize our limits and thus we are able to exercise a measure of control over technology.

We should develop technologies that reflect our values of freedom, equality and democracy. For example, Ellul did envision in the early 1980's the potential use of computer technology in a way that would create a decentralized source of knowledge that would maintain the values of democracy. We know this now as the internet. However, as Ellul also argued technology cannot change society for the better if we don't change ourselves. The computer can also be used to bring in stifling State control.[\[9\]](#) We will never have a perfect technology that has no problems, but we should be visionaries in how we think about technology and the application of our values to it.

Limits serve as a warning to us. It is obvious that society has progressed in many ways thanks to advanced technology, but society's spiritual regression shares the same condition as advancement. We have not become better people because we live in the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth century. Without a renewed spiritual and moral framework to direct our development and give new purpose to the system, technology may become the source of our own destruction rather than improvement. An inventory of advancement compares starkly with the litany of potential catastrophe. We have eliminated

disease, but also created dangerous levels of overpopulation. We live longer and more abundant lives materially, but are pushing the natural world into extinction. We are able to travel quicker and communicate instantly, contributing to world peace and understanding, but have also developed the weapons of war to unimaginable levels of devastation.

Without a moral framework to control technology and understand its ethical limits we will go down a path of losing control of technology's direction, allowing it to develop autonomously. This means it will develop in a predetermined linear direction, like a clock that will inevitably strike midnight once wound up. That direction as we have seen moves inexorably closer to the mechanization of humanity and nature. With the right value-system we can begin to reassert control. The choice is yours. Where do you want to go?

## Notes

1. Rudi Volti, *Society and Technological Change*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth Publishes, 2001), 3.
2. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York; Harper, 1977), 16, 17.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 2.
5. John Herman Randall, Jr. *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 227.
6. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine; Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966); Idem, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005).
7. Jacob Bronowski, "Technology and Culture in Evolution,"

*Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1. 3(1971): 199.

8. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxxiii.

9. Jacques Ellul, "New Hope for the Technological Society: An Interview with Jacques Ellul" in *Et cetera* 40.2 (1983): 192-206.

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# 2012: Domsday All Over Again

## Progress or Regress

It is the end of the world again. The world was predicted to end at least eight times in the past 30 years, from the Jupiter Effect in 1982 to what became a common punch line, "88 reasons why the rapture will happen in 1988." Then there was the granddaddy of all false apocalyptic prophecies: the millennium bug of 2000, when it was widely held that all computers would fail at the turn of the millennium. Let's not forget the two failed predictions of the end in 2011. Now the world faces yet another prediction of the end with the Mayan calendar prophecy of 2012. In an age of super-science, computers, space travel and accelerating progress, why are people fascinated with the end of the world?

We have all heard the phrase "What goes up must come down." This captures the popular attitude towards progress and regress. Americans believe strongly in human perfectibility and the inevitability of technological progress. This idea states that as technology moves society from its primitive state to an advanced condition it will eventually improve, bringing a better tomorrow. The world is getting better and better. Faith in progress provides the engine for all the

accelerating technological changes from space exploration, media, computers, to science and medicine. Historian Robert Nisbet noted the essential role of progress in our belief system when he said that progress does not represent one aspect of modern life, but in fact provides the keystone idea and context for the entire modern worldview, including democracy, equality, social justice and, of course, science and technology.<sup>[1]</sup> The modern world does not exist without the belief in progress. Technological improvement makes no sense without the larger *telos*, or purpose of history, guiding it. Simply put, all of this innovation leads to a utopian future.

So we are left with the question, If America is so progressive why is it so obsessed with the end of the world or *apocalypticism*, a belief that is not progressive, but regressive? This view of history does not move toward a utopian society of universal peace, ease and convenience, but rather toward calamity. Progress and regress share the same view of history. Any belief in progress necessarily has a regressive interpretation. They each look at the same circumstances and data and draw complementary conclusions. One sees the dawn of a great society, the other sees the end of the world. They represent complementary ideas in the same way life and death complement each other. What lives eventually dies, so what progresses will also necessarily regress.

All people intuitively know that they will die one day; so then society, the collective "person," knows it too must one day die. If progress takes place we know that its opposite, regress, will also happen. Regressive thought states that the progress we take for granted potentially has a downside and in fact will result in something catastrophic. Our society will one day come to an end. It cannot live forever any more than an individual can live forever in a mortal body. We know that what goes up must come down. The current obsession over the end of the world in movies, such as *2012*, *Melancholia* and *Contagion* or wildly popular novels such as the *Left Behind*

series, the predictions of popular preachers or the Mayan prophecy all cater to our regressive and pessimistic side. This is not as bad as it first sounds. Death creates the foundation of all religion, philosophy and culture as attempts to provide answers for our questions and solace in times of doubt and need. The reality of death causes people to look for the meaning of life. Christians need to harness the regressive side of culture because it warns of imminent danger and offers the opportunity to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Regressive thinking, like the knowledge of our own death, makes us all aware of our need for God and the Savior. Believers must take advantage of this primal consciousness of the end to tell people about what the Bible says concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. But in order to do this successfully we must first establish guidelines on how to identify false prophecy.

## **What the Bible Says**

Today people are searching for the meaning of life in the wrong places, such as the prophecies of Nostradamus, astrology and, again, the Mayan prophecy of 2012. It is a sign of the end times when there are many false prophets talking about the end of the world (Matthew 24:11). The false prophet shows that people are aware that the end is near.

There are two rules in Scripture that will help believers identify false prophets, which should be followed without exception. First, prophecy *must never set a date regarding when the world will end*. Jesus spoke clearly about the signs of His return and the end of the world when He said, "But of the day and the hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who comes to you with a firm date as to when the world will end such as December 21, 2012 should be avoided. Cultists continually violate this cardinal rule. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world eight times between 1914 and 1975. Popular radio preacher Harold

Camping predicted the end in 1994 and twice in 2011. The speculation surrounding the year 2000 was much like it is today over 2012. Scientific evidence was proffered predicting that all computers would fail at the turn of the last millennium. This warning was taken very seriously by most people who made preparations for the potential disaster, demonstrating the pervasive sentiment of impending doom.

However, many Bible-believing Christians also fall prey to the error of date-setting, even if this practice is often veiled in vague language and logic. For example, when prophecy experts identify leading political figures as the Antichrist, such as Hitler, Mussolini or Saddam Hussein, they engage in false prophecy. This approach will invariably get us into trouble because it starts the clock ticking. If Saddam Hussein were the Antichrist, then logically Christ should have returned before the end of his life, since the Antichrist is the precursor to the coming of Christ (Rev. 6:2; 2 Thess. 2:3). However, we know that did not happen. In this way, identification of the Antichrist with any leading figure becomes false prophecy.

How much better it would have been to say Hussein was *like* the Antichrist or prefigured the Antichrist, rather than identify him as the Antichrist. This simple switch in focus spares us the humiliation of false prophecy, but retains all the power of moral denunciation that apocalyptic thinking offers.

This leads to the second rule of indentifying false prophecy: *all prophecy must have a moral imperative*. This means people should not engage in speculation and prognostication for the fun of it. A biblical approach to prophecy gives a warning about future judgment and a chance to repent: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3; see also 2 Thess. 2:1, 5-10). Prophecy engages in denouncing moral outrage, which is why it couches things in the strongest possible language. To say that the world is

coming to an end or that someone is the Antichrist gets a lot of attention, but requires a moral cause to justify its claims.

If the prophecy gives a date and it lacks the moral imperative, then the prophecy reveals itself to be false and sensationalistic. The Mayan 2012 prophecy fails on both counts. Although it causes us to contemplate the end, it sets a date and offers no reason for why the world should end. It is simply doomsday all over again!

## Notes

1. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 9, 171.

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### See Also:

- [2012: Is the Sky Really Falling?](#)

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# Christians in the World

*Don Closson looks at three books on how to live the Christian life in 21st century America: Radical, The Next Christians, and To Change the World.*

## Introduction

Have you ever heard a sermon that tried to convince you that our earthly possessions should be looked at more like a hotel room rather than a permanent home? The point being that earth is a nice place to visit, but it's not a believer's final destination.



As aliens and strangers, our real residence is with God which usually implies a heavenly spiritual existence that is completely foreign to our current one. In a bit of a twist, a recent article in *Christianity Today* argued that most evangelicals have things backwards. We are wrong if we think that at Christ's return the wicked will be "left behind" and the righteous will be taken away to a heavenly abode. It's the wicked who will be removed while the righteous remain on earth. The author's conclusion is that we should be more caring about this world because it, not heaven, will be our eternal home.

How we view "final things" or the "end times" impacts how we live today. There is a heated debate going on about the priorities of those who desire to live out a biblical worldview. Should we be focused on restoring this world, redeeming it for God, or on offering the lifeboat of salvation in order to save some from impending destruction along with the rest of the cosmos? Are we to be mostly about creating a restored culture through our Spirit empowered efforts, or are we seeking salvation for a redeemed people leaving restoration of the world to special acts of God?

In this article I will focus on three popular books that offer different perspectives on how Christians should prioritize their lives: *Radical* by David Platt, a mega-church pastor from Birmingham, Alabama; *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons, a conference speaker who has created an organization to encourage dialogue about the purpose of the church; and *To Change the World* by James Hunter, the lone academic, a professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia.



Platt's book is simple and straightforward. He tells his story mostly by giving examples of people in his church who were radicalized by the gospel. Lyons' book is a polemic against what he calls a gospel that only tells half of God's story. Hunter gives us a scholarly tome, calling Christians to humility when it comes to changing the culture in which we dwell. Although these books are different in significant ways, they all present an argument against the so-called American dream of runaway materialism and extreme individualism.

Three different books, espousing a similar message, told with both passion and thoughtfulness. Join me as we consider how Christians are to dwell on earth as aliens and strangers.

## **Becoming a Radical**

The strength of David Platt's book *Radical* is its simplicity. He pleads with us to believe what Jesus says and then to obey it. But like most things in life, his simple admonition hides nuances and assumptions that beg further explanation.

Platt fills his book with example after example of Christians making radical life decisions as they reject both the American dream and the typical American way of doing church. He argues that "[W]e as Christ followers in American churches have embraced values and ideas that are not only unbiblical but that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe."<sup>[1]</sup> After introducing himself as one of the youngest pastors to lead a mega-church, he admits that the "bigger-is-better" tendency in our churches is hard to support in Scripture.

Platt's concerns are worthy of much soul searching and careful interpretation of God's Word. But about halfway through the book I found myself both attracted to, and frustrated by, the many stories of life change among Platt's congregants as well as his own struggles over how to lead his church in a way that is Christ honoring. For example, Platt's discussion of Luke 9

results in this sentence: “We *do* have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We *do* have to love him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that he *will* tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor.”<sup>{2}</sup> Unfortunately, when I looked for principles to know when and to what extent Jesus is asking me to do these things, I didn’t find that Platt offered any.

Platt leaves little room for interpretation when it comes to the words of Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus used rabbinic hyperbole or exaggeration common to the Jewish teachers of his day when making his more drastic comments about holy living? Even though Platt occasionally tempers his remarks with an “I don’t have all the answers” or “I have more questions than answers,” he writes as if his reading of the text is obvious and conclusive.<sup>{3}</sup>

Platt’s book *Radical* is intended to shock culturally captive Christians out of their American Dream stupor and to become serious Christ followers. His one-year dare at the end includes activities from which all believers would benefit. We should be praying for the entire world, reading through the entire Word, sacrificing our money for Kingdom purposes, reaching out to those in other cultural settings, and committing ourselves to multiplying church communities. I just wish that Platt had given us a little more nuanced guidance as to when and to what extent Christians should live a radical life.

## **Restoring Eden**

Of the three books we are examining in this article, I anticipated the arrival of Gabe Lyons’ book *The Next Christians* the most. I had read glowing endorsements and was hoping not to be disappointed.

The first of three sections in the book describes how the world has changed in its perception of Christianity. Although there is much good information here, Lyons resorts to the phrase “perfect storm” once too often in describing our current cultural milieu. He is right to describe attitudes towards believers in post-Christian America as mostly negative, but I am cautious about his complaint that our situation today is somehow unique.[{4}](#)

Lyons describes the church’s response to social change as either separatist or cultural. The separatists are characterized by judgmental withdrawal from society, aggressively defending a Christian America that no longer exists. They reduce the Christian’s task to saving a few souls via evangelism in ways often offensive to our pluralistic society. It’s not a pretty picture. According to Lyons, we are far too influenced by the remnants of the Fundamentalist movement that did battle with modernism at the beginning of the last century.

Cultural Christians seek to blend into the culture rather than judge it, and define the Christian life as primarily doing kind things for others. These self-identified Christians place tolerance high on their list of virtues and are working diligently to avoid topics or actions that might alienate their neighbors. Lyons argues that they have conformed to the culture in a way that relinquishes any hope of having significant impact.

Lyons endorses a third category which he calls *restorers*. He describes these people as those who “envision the world as it was meant to be and they work toward that vision. Restorers seek to mend earth’s brokenness.”[{5}](#) They are optimistic, and see “that God is on the move—doing something unique in our time.”[{6}](#) Their mission is to see “how things ought to be,” and then to commit their lives to making it so.[{7}](#)

In a manner similar to Platt’s book *Radical*, Lyons chastises

Christians who focus too much on the Gospel message of redemption and emphasizing a salvation that offers escape from this fallen world. By putting restoration back into God's story we don't have to wait for God to give us a new heaven and earth, we can experience it now.

Lyons' call to action is an expansive one and it immediately raises questions about what a restored world should look like; what specific form should our political and economic systems take? He seems to assume that we should know the answer to these questions but I am not so sure that it's that obvious.

## **A Faithful Presence**

We will now consider the most academic of the three books we are examining, James Hunter's book *To Change the World*. Not only is Hunter's book one third longer than the other two, it is far more abstract in content. Where the other two books give significant space to stories of lives changed by a biblical calling, Hunter devotes less than three pages to real life examples. What we do get is a thoughtful overview of how most Christians wrongly pursue political power in the name of Christ.

According to Hunter, Christians can be broken down into three distinct groups: the Christian Right, the Christian Left and the Neo-Anabaptists. The Christian Right seeks to win the culture war. In its eyes, Christian America is disappearing and needs to be defended. Secularism has conquered the media, academia, and government, resulting in a culture that rejects biblical values and corrupts our children.

In many ways the Christian Left and Neo-Anabaptists look a lot alike. They are hostile towards an unrestrained market economy and capitalism itself. They also share a sharp loathing for the Christian Right. But they differ dramatically regarding the believer's relationship to government. The Left see the

government as a partner while the Neo-Anabaptists see it only as a coercive force that uses violence to enforce its will.

Hunter argues that all three groups seek political power in order to change the culture, a goal that will inevitably fail. He spends a large portion of the book explaining why changing a culture is far more difficult than most appreciate. Cultures are more complex and resilient than we think and cannot be changed by just putting new ideas in people's minds.

In the end, Hunter calls Christians to what he describes as a faithful presence. Rather than defending against the secularization of culture, trying to be relevant to it, or even seeking purity from its negative effects he calls for another response that lends authenticity without sacrificing coherence and depth to our faith.

Building a faithful presence requires that our leaders care more about discipleship than fighting the culture war or gaining political power. Christ followers today have faith but lack a vision for living that is distinct from the larger post-Christian culture. For Hunter, "A theology of faithful presence means a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God."[8](#) Hunter realizes that the New Heavens and New Earth will be God's restoring work, but by honoring God through our relationships and our tasks we will taste something of His kingdom now.

## Summary

In this article we have considered three stimulating and passionate books, *Radical* by David Platt, *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons and *To Change the World* by James Hunter and have been left with three overlapping pictures of what it means to be a Christ follower in the current American culture. Is the Christian life about being a radical, being as counter-

cultural as possible? Is it restoring the world to a pre-fall condition? Or is it as simple as being a disciple maker?

The apostle Paul certainly lived a radical lifestyle, but he was limited by a couple of parameters. Paul talks about being free from the expectations of men and yet careful not to give offense in any way that might hinder the gospel.<sup>{9}</sup> He was culturally sensitive enough to know what actions or words might keep people from hearing the good news. He said that he became all things to all men so that some might be saved. He conformed to the culture enough to communicate the transcendent truth about Jesus.

Paul says very little about reforming Roman society, the government, commerce, or education. He seems to be much more concerned about the culture within the church than he does the culture at large. He writes, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?”<sup>{10}</sup> His desire was for Christ followers to live out the “one another” passages that fill the New Testament. To be loving, encouraging, building up, and bearing with one another in a way that will draw outsiders to the gospel.

What about Gabe Lyons’ strong emphasis on restoration? In my mind the issue is one of priorities. Most Christians would like to see their efforts result in some degree of healing and restoration in our society. But is healing and restoration of America our first priority? This might be true if one holds the view that Christians must take over society prior to Christ’s return, as do some postmillennialists. But for those who believe that Christ will return as a conquering king to a world in rebellion, there is no expectation or responsibility for Christians to restore the planet. These differing positions show, once again, the relevance of theology to everyday life.

International speaker and author Os Guinness describes clearly our first priority as believers. He writes, “All that we do

must be first and last for Christ and His kingdom, not for America, or the West, or democracy, or whatever. The 'first things' must be first again, and everything else must be viewed only a bonus or a by-product, and not our prime concern." [\[11\]](#) Since God has chosen to build his kingdom through the church, it is Christ's church that should receive our primary efforts.

## Notes

1. David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010) pg. 3.
2. Ibid., pg. 12.
3. Ibid., pg. 3.
4. Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) pg. 11.
5. Ibid., pg. 47.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pg. 60.
8. James Hunter, *To Change the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pg. 95.
9. 2 Corinthians 6:3.
10. 1 Corinthians 5:12.
11. Os Guinness "Os Guinness Calls for a New Christian Renaissance," *Christian Post*, [www.christianpost.com/news/51309/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/51309/)