

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.[\[1\]](#)

In the early 1980s, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar "Campaign for Forgiveness Research" (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness "releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood

pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”[{2}](#)

He’s big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, “The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others.” [{3}](#)

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society’s conflicts, “almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing.”[{4}](#)

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa’s apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film.[{5}](#) I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture.[{6}](#)

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time "to go to my neighbor, to the person that I've wronged." He says he and his compatriots should "climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, 'Look, I'm sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'" [{7}](#)

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow." {8}

Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives. "When we confess our sins," she explained, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever." {9} After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

"A fine message, *Fraulein!*" said the man. "How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. . . . I was a guard there. . . . But since that time . . . I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein.*" He extended his hand again. "Will you forgive me?"

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeance raged inside her, she remembered Jesus' death for this man. How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a "healing warmth" flooding her body. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, "With all my heart."

"And so," Corrie later recalled, "I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on [God's]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

"My Father, the Town Alcoholic"

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms "grudge" and "grudge management" in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt "forgiveness" was a feminine activity, but a "grudge" was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren't family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his mother but despised his father "more than anyone else in the world."[{11}](#) His friends would joke about his dad being drunk. It tore him up inside. "I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family," McDowell relates. "I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I'd go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn't get up, lying in the manure behind the cows." Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, "of a broken heart."

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity's validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus' claims and found it convincing.[{12}](#) He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, "I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: 'Dad, I've become a Christian and . . . I love you.'"

"But how . . . how can you love a father like me?" Josh's dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God's hands. "My dad's life was brand new those last 14 months," recalls Josh. "His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker."

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, "How does all this relate to me personally?" May I offer some suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself*. The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."[{13}](#) Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say

something like this to Him right now:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."[{14}](#) The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronged—or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended should run into each other as each is en route to contact the other.[{15}](#) Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."[{16}](#)

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, loc. cit.
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine*, May/June 2001, 78; <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.
9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.
10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.
11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this

source.

12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.

13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2001, 73;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html>.

Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.

14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.

15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.

16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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Hell: The Horrible Choice

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

The Importance of Understanding the Doctrine of Hell

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

Dr. Peter Kreeft and Ron Tacelli write:

Of all the doctrines in Christianity, hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe and the first to be abandoned. The critic's case against it

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

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

I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. . . . I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture: and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.{2}

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

I am sure that many of us have friends who find the Bible's teaching on hell to be offensive and use this doctrine to paint the God of the Bible as a cruel and vindictive being.

However, most unbelievers' attacks of this doctrine are built on a false understanding of hell. Christians also have difficulty defending the justice of hell with the love of God because we lack a proper understanding of what the Bible teaches. In this article, I will present the biblical teaching on hell so that we can present a sound response when challenged.

The Nature of Hell

Hell is basically a place of eternal separation from God. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 states that those without God "will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power." To be separated from God is to be separated from all that is good. A person in hell is separated from all the joy, love, and meaning for which we were created. Instead of knowing God as a loving father, one will know God as judge (Romans 2: 5-8). That is the attribute of God an unbeliever will know for eternity.

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

who chooses not to love God and now must live with the sorrow of being aware of all that was lost.

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

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

Why Hell Is Necessary and Just

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

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

future time to fulfill God's justice and holiness.

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

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

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

Why Hell?

Hell is also necessary because of the nature of man.

Human *depravity* requires hell. The only just punishment for sin against the eternal God is eternal punishment. God is

absolutely perfect and mankind is sinful.

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

Second, human *dignity* requires hell. God created us as free moral creatures, and He will not force people into His presence if they do not want to be there. If a person chooses not to be with God in his or her lifetime, He will respect that decision. In Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel because they rejected their savior and thus were not willing to accept the love of God. Christ as Lord of creation could have forced His will on His creatures, but instead respected their decision even though it broke His heart.

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

Romans 1 states that all have had an opportunity to respond to God's invitation and are therefore without excuse. Human

beings are created in God's image and are creatures of incredible value. God does not annihilate beings of value even though they rejected His love. Instead He respects their decision, honors their dignity, and allows them to dwell eternally apart from Him as they have chosen.

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

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

W. Norton, 1993), 87.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan), 69.

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Christianity and Religious Pluralism – Are There Multiple Ways to Heaven?

Rick Wade takes a hard look at the inconsistencies of religious pluralism. He concludes that if Christ is a way to heaven there cannot be other ways to heaven. Whether Christianity is true or not, pluralism does not make rational sense as it considers all religious traditions to be essentially the same.

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

In a humorous short article in which he highlighted some of the silly beliefs people hold today, Steve Turner wrote, “We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation sin heaven hell God and salvation.”[\[1\]](#)

It is the common belief today that all religions are basically the same. They may *look* different—they may differ with respect to holy books or forms of worship or specific ideas about God—but at the root they’re pretty much the same. That idea has become so deeply rooted that it is considered common knowledge. To express doubt about it draws an incredulous

stare. Obviously, anyone who thinks one religion is the true one is close-minded and benighted! More than that, the person is clearly a bigot who probably even hates people of other religions (or people with no religion at all). Now, this way of thinking is very seldom formed by serious consideration of the issues, I believe (although there are knowledgeable scholars who hold to it), but that doesn't matter. It is part of our cultural currency and is held with the same conviction as the belief that planets in the solar system revolve around the Sun and not Earth.

On the surface at least, it's clear enough that the various religions of the world are different. Theists believe in one personal God; Hindus believe in many gods; atheists deny any God exists. Just on that issue alone, the differences are obvious. Add to that the many beliefs about the dilemma of the human race and how it is to be solved. Why don't people understand the significance of these differences? On the scholarly level, the fundamental objection is this. It is believed that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) is too different from us for us to know him (or her or it). Because of our limitations, he couldn't possibly reveal himself to us. Religious writings, then, are merely human attempts at explaining religious experience without actually being objectively true.

Philosopher John Hick wrote that this is really a problem of language. Statements about God don't have the same truth value as ones about, say, the weather, because "there is no . . . agreement about how to determine the truth value of statements about God."[\[2\]](#) We use religious language because it is meaningful to us, but there is really no way to confirm the truth of such talk. Because we can't really know what the truth is about God, we do our best to guess at it. For this reason, we are not to suggest that our beliefs are true and others false.

On the more popular level, the loss of confidence in being

able to know religious and moral truths which comes from academia and filters through the media, is teamed up with an inclusivist attitude that doesn't want anyone left out—that is, if there are any truths to be known.

I want to take a look at the issue of religious pluralism, the belief that there are many valid ways to God. We'll start with some definitions and a reminder of what historical Christianity teaches about God and us and how we can be reconciled to Him.

Starting Points

There are three basic positions on the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. The historic view is called *exclusivism*. That word can be a real turn-off to people because we live in an inclusivistic era. What it means in this context is that the claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way means that all other ways to God are excluded. If Jesus is the only way to the one true God, then no other claims can be true.

Another view on the matter is *inclusivism*. This is the belief that, while salvation is made possible only by the cross of Christ, it can be obtained without hearing the gospel. Even people who are externally part of other religions traditions can be saved. This is a temptation for Christians who are convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but don't like the idea that there are people who haven't heard the gospel who thus cannot be saved.

By religious *pluralism*, we mean the belief that all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) are valid as ways to relate to God. There is nothing unique about Christ; He was one of many influential religious teachers and leaders. This is the position I'll be considering in this article.

Before looking at pluralism, it would be good to review the

historic Christian understanding of salvation to bring the contrast into bold relief.

One God

The Bible is clear that there is one God. Through Isaiah the prophet God said, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Is. 45:5a; see also 43:10; 44:6).

Beyond this, it's important to note that, philosophically speaking, it is impossible that there could be two (or more) "Gods" like the God of the Bible. Scripture is clear that God is everywhere present at once, so there can't be a truly competing presence (Ps. 139:7-12). God is capable of doing whatever He wills. There can be no ultimate interference by another deity. "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths," says the Psalmist (135:6). Or more succinctly, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:35). How could there be two Gods like this? They would have to be absolutely identical, since neither one could be interfered with. And if so, they would be the same God!

One Savior

The Bible is also clear that there is only one Savior. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:6). To the rulers and elders and scribes in Jerusalem, Peter declared, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Theological necessity

In addition, it was theologically necessary for salvation to come through Christ alone. In Hebrews chapter 9 we read that the death of the sacrifice was necessary. According to Hebrews chapter 7, the Savior had to be divine (see also 2 Cor. 5:21).

And Hebrews 2:17 says the Savior had to be human. Jesus is the only one who fulfills those requirements.

One more consideration

To this we can add the fact that the apostles never even hinted that people could be saved any other way than through Christ. It is this belief that has fueled evangelistic endeavors all over the world.

Religious Pluralism Can't Accomplish Its Goal

Even on the surface of it, the notion of religious pluralism is contradictory. If we can't know that particular religions are true, how can we know that *any* are valid ways to God? The pluralist has to know that we can't know (which is an interesting idea in itself!), while also having confidence that somehow we'll be able to reach our goal through our particular beliefs and practices.

But that brings serious questions to the surface. Do all religions even *have* the same goal? That's an important issue. In fact, it's the first of three problems with religious pluralism I'd like to consider.

Can religious pluralism accomplish its goal? What do I mean by that? Two ideas are at work here. First, it is believed that we can't really know what is true about God; our religions are only approximations of truth. Second, if that is so, aren't we being high-handed if we tell a people that their religion isn't true? How can any religion claim to have *the* truth? To be intellectually honest, we need to consider all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) as equally valid. There is a personal element here, too. The pluralist wants to take the *people* of all religions seriously. Telling anyone his or her religion is false doesn't seem to signal that kind of respect.

So the goal of which I speak is taking people seriously with respect to their religious beliefs.

I can explain this best by introducing a British scholar named John Hick and tell a little of his story.[{3}](#) Hick was once a self-declared evangelical who says he underwent a genuine conversion experience as a college student. He immediately began to associate with members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in England. Over time, however, his philosophical training and reading of certain New Testament scholars made him begin to have doubts about doctrinal matters. He also saw that, on the one hand, there were adherents of other religions who were good people, while, on the other, there were some Christians who were not very nice people but were sure of their seat in heaven. How could it be, he thought, that God would send these good Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists to hell while saving those not-so-good Christians just because they believed in Jesus? Hick went on to develop his own understanding of religious pluralism and became probably the best-known pluralist in the scholarly world.

I relate all this to you to point out that, at least as far as the eye of man can see, Hick's motivation was a good one: he wanted to believe that all people, no matter what religious stripe, can be saved. Harold Netland, who studied under Hick and wrote a book on his pluralism, speaks very highly of Hick's personal character.[{4}](#) And isn't there something appealing about his view (again, from our standpoint)? Wouldn't we like everyone to be saved? And having heard about (or experienced directly) the violence fueled by religious fanaticism, it's easy to see why many people recoil against the idea that only one religion has the truth. We want everyone included! We want everyone to feel like his or her religious beliefs are respected and even affirmed!

The problem is that we are supposed to view our beliefs as *approximations* of truth, as somehow meaningful to us but not really true. All people are to be welcomed into the universal

family of faith—but they are to leave at the door the belief that what they believe is true. It's as though the pluralist is saying, "It is really noble of you to be so committed to your faith. Of course, we know that little of what you believe can be taken as truth, but that's okay. It gives meaning to your life." Or in other words, "We want you to feel validated in your religion, even though your religious doctrines aren't literally true."

To be quite honest, I don't feel affirmed by that. My religious belief is completely undermined by this idea. If Jesus isn't the only way to God, Christianity is a complete lie, and I am believing in vain.

My belief is that salvation—the reconciliation of persons to the one, true trinitarian God—has been made possible by Jesus, *and* that I *know* this to be the case. In his first epistle, John wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). If I can't know this to be true, the promises of Scripture are only wishes. In that case, my hope for eternity is no more secure than crossing my fingers and saying I hope it won't rain this weekend. We are all, in short, forced to abandon our notions of the validity of our religious beliefs and accept the skepticism of the pluralist. And I don't feel affirmed by that.

For my money, to be told I might be very sincere but sincerely wrong if I take my beliefs as true in any literal sense is like being condescendingly patted on the head. To be honest, I take such a notion as arrogance.

So my first objection to religious pluralism is that it does not accomplish its goal of making me feel affirmed with respect to my religious beliefs beyond whatever emotional fulfillment I might get from pretending the beliefs are true.

Religious Pluralism Doesn't Make Sense

My second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. Let me explain.

Christianity is a confessional religion. In other words, there are particular beliefs we confess to be true, and it is partly through confessing them that we are saved. Is that surprising? Aren't we saved by faith, by putting our trust in Christ? Yes, but there are specific things we are supposed to believe. It isn't just believing *in*; it's also believing *that*. For example, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe *that I am he* you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:23-24). And then there's Paul's clear statement that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). So what we believe is very important despite what some are saying now about how Christianity is a relationship and how doctrine isn't all that important.

Back to my point. Christians who know what the Bible teaches and the basics of other religions find themselves staring open-mouthed at people who say that all religions are basically the same. How could anyone who knows anything about the major religions of the world even think such a thing? I suspect that most people who say this do *not* know the teachings of the various religions. They have some vague notions about religion in general, so they reduce these great bodies of belief to a few essentials. Don't all religions believe in a higher power or powers? Isn't their function just to give meaning to our lives? Don't they all typically include such things as prayer, rituals of one kind or another in public and private worship, standards for moral living, holy books, and the like?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has said something like this: Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different, but just the opposite is true. People believe there are some core beliefs and practices such as those I just named which are common to all religions, and that religions are different only on the surface. Muslims have the Koran; Christians have the Bible; Jews have the Torah; Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Muslims pray five times a day; Christians pray at church on Sundays and most anytime they want during the week. Buddhists have their shrines; Jews their synagogues; Hindus their temples; Muslims their mosques; and Christians their churches. So at the core, the same; on the surface, different.

But just the opposite is true! It is on the *surface* that there is similarity; that is why we can immediately look at certain bodies of beliefs and practices and label them "religion." They aren't identical, but they are similar enough to be under the same category, "religion." On the surface we see prayers, rituals, holy books, etc. It's when we dig down to the *essential* beliefs that we find contradictory differences!

For example, Islam is theistic but is unitarian while Christianity is trinitarian. Hindus believe we are not true individual selves but are parts of the All, while orthodox Jews believe we are individuals created in the image of God. Muslims believe salvation comes through obedience to Allah, while Buddhists believe "salvation" consists of spinning out of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into nirvana.

No, religions are *not* essentially the same and only superficially different. At their very core they are drastically different. So while pluralists might take the religious person seriously, they don't take his or her *beliefs* seriously. How can all these different beliefs be true in any meaningful sense? How can the end of human existence be *both* nirvana *and* heaven or hell? Pluralists have to reduce all these beliefs to some vague possibility of an afterlife of

some kind; they have to empty them of any significant content.

So what we believe to be true, pluralists know isn't. Isn't it interesting that the pluralist is insightful enough to know what millions of religious adherents don't! That's a strange position to take given that the heart of pluralism is the belief that we can't know what is ultimately true about God!

It is for this reason that my second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. It claims that our different beliefs are essentially the same, which is false on the surface of it. And it claims that the differences result from the fact that we can't know what is true, while the pluralist acts like he or she *can* know what is true.

Pluralism Is Incompatible with Christianity

Religious pluralism may well be *the* most common attitude about religion in America. You might be wondering, Aren't there a lot of Christians in America? According to the polls, one would think so. But I dare say that if you polled people in your church, especially young people, you would find more than a few who are religious pluralists. They believe that, while Christianity is true for them, it isn't necessarily true for other people. Is pluralism a legitimate option for Christians? In short, no.

This, then, is my third objection to religious pluralism, namely, that religious pluralism is incompatible with Christianity because it demands that Christians deny the central truths of Scripture. If religious pluralism is true, Jesus' claims to deity and biblical teaching about His atoning death and resurrection cannot be true.

The Bible is clear that salvation comes through accepting by

faith the finished work of Jesus who is the only way to salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that at one time they “were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). Without Christ they were without God. He told the Romans that righteousness came through Jesus and the atoning sacrifice He made (5:6-10, 17). Jesus said plainly that “no one comes to the Father but by me” (Jn. 14:6). Because pluralism denies these specifics about salvation, it is clearly at odds with Christianity.

There is a more general truth that separates Christianity and pluralism, namely, that Christianity is grounded in specific historical events, not abstract religious ideas. Pluralists, as it were, line up all the major, enduring religions in front of them and look for similarities such as those we have already noted: prayers, rituals, holy books, and so on. They *abstract* these characteristics and say, “Look. They’re all really the same because they do and have the same kinds of things.” But that won’t do for Christianity. It is not just some set of abstract “religious” beliefs and practices. It is grounded in specific historical events.

This is a crucial point. The historicity of Christianity is critical to its truth or falsity. God’s project of salvation is inextricably connected with particular historical events such as the fall, the flood, the obedience of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the fall of Israel and Judah, the return to Israel—all events leading to Jesus, a historical person who accomplished our salvation through a historical event. It is through these events that God declared and carried out His plans, and nowhere do we read that He would do so with other people through other events and teachings. The truth of Christianity stands or falls with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and their meaning revealed by God. If the resurrection is historically false, “we are to be pitied more than all men,” Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19). If this was

God's way, and Jesus declared Himself to be the *only* way, then no other way is available.

One thing the church must *not* do is let any of its members think that their way is only one way. This isn't to condone elitism or condescension or discrimination against others, even though that's what a lot of people believe today. That believing in the exclusivity of Christ does *not* necessarily result in an attitude of elitism is seen in Jesus Himself. His belief that He was and is the only way to the Father is clear, but few people will criticize Him for having the attitudes just mentioned. It is a strange thing, isn't it? Christians who say Jesus is the only way are condemned as self-righteous bigots, while the One who boldly declared not His religion but *Himself* as the only way is considered a good man!

To sum up, then. Pluralism falls under its own weight, for it cannot affirm all religious beliefs as it seems to desire, and its belief that religions are all pretty much the same, even though their core teachings are contradictory, doesn't make sense. It also is certainly incompatible with Christianity which declares that the truth of its teachings stand or fall with specific historical events. And frankly, its claim to know that no religion really has the truth because such truth can't be known, comes off as a rather hollow declaration in light of the knowledge pluralists think they possess.

Notes

1. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).
2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 3.
3. See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chap. 1.
4. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1991), ix.

A Brief Overview of the Gospel of Judas

Dr. Patrick Zukeran explains why the Gospel of Judas poses no threat to the Bible or to Christianity; it only provides insight into early Gnosticism.

Newspaper headlines all over the world reported that the lost *Gospel of Judas* has been recovered and translated. Reporters state that this gospel sheds new light on the life of Christ and His relationship with Judas who may not be the traitor portrayed in the New Testament Gospels. In fact he may be the hero! He is cast as the most senior and trusted of Jesus' disciples who betrayed Jesus at the Lord's request! This gospel further states that Jesus revealed secret knowledge to Judas instructing him to turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities. So rather than acting out of greed or Satanic influence, Judas was faithfully following the orders given to him by Christ. Does the *Gospel of Judas* reveal a new twist to the passion story of Christ? Are there new historic insights that should have Christians concerned?

The *Gospel of Judas* was discovered in 1978 by a farmer in a cave near El Minya in central Egypt. Scholars date this Coptic text to have been written between A.D. 300 and 400.^{1} Most scholars believe the original text was written in Greek and that the original manuscript was written in middle second century.^{2}

The authorship of this gospel is unknown but it is unlikely that Judas or a disciple of Christ wrote it. It represents

Gnostic thought that began to flourish around that time. The earliest mention of it is from Irenaeus writing in 180 A.D. who condemned this work as heretical.

The *Gospel of Judas* is similar to the Gnostic literature found in other areas along the Nile, including the Nag Hammadi library that contained nearly forty-five Gnostic texts, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Peter* and other texts.

What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism flourished from the second to the fourth century A.D. What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism derives its title from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge and refers to the mystical or secret knowledge of God and the oneness of self with God. Here is a basic summary of Gnostic philosophy.[{3}](#)

First, Gnosticism taught the secret knowledge of dualism that the material world was evil and the spiritual realm was pure. Second, God is not distinct from man but mankind is, in essence, divine. God is the spirit and light within the individual. When one understood self, one understood all. Third, the fundamental problem in Gnosticism was not sin but ignorance. The way to attain oneness with the divine was by attaining mystical knowledge. Fourth, salvation was reached by gaining secret knowledge, or *gnosis* of the real nature of the world and of the self. Fifth, the goal in Gnosticism was unity with God. This came through escaping the prison of the impure body in order for the soul of the individual to travel through space avoiding hostile demons, and uniting with God.

In reference to Jesus, Gnosticism taught that Jesus was not distinct from His disciples. Those who attained Gnostic insight became a Christ like Jesus. Princeton University professor of religion Dr. Elaine Pagels writes, "Whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes no longer a Christian but a Christ."[{4}](#) So Jesus was not the unique Son of God and a savior who would die for the sins of the world, but a teacher

who revealed secret knowledge to worthy followers.

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to Old and New Testament teachings. The Bible is in opposition to Gnostic teaching on fundamental doctrines such as the nature of God, Christ, the material world, sin, salvation, and eternity. Jews and Christians rejected Gnostic teaching as heretical, and the Gnostics rejected Christianity. Gnostic philosophy is what is taught throughout the *Gospel of Judas*. Like other Gnostic literature, there is very little similarity between the *Gospel of Judas* and the New Testament writings. This gospel contradicts the New Testament in major ways.

Contents of the Gospel of Judas

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to biblical Christianity, and the *Gospel of Judas* reflects Gnostic thought rather than biblical theology. An example of Gnostic philosophy is reflected in the mission of Jesus as portrayed in this gospel.

Dr. Marvin Meyer, professor of Bible at Chapman College, summarizes the goal of Jesus' mission according this gospel.

“For Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas*, death is no tragedy, nor is it a necessary evil to bring about forgiveness of sins.... Death, as the exit from this absurd physical existence, is not to be feared or dreaded. Far from being an occasion of sadness, death is the means by which Jesus is liberated from the flesh in order that he might return to his heavenly home, and by betraying Jesus, Judas helps his friend discard his body and free his inner self, the divine self.”[\[5\]](#)

In the New Testament, Jesus' mission is clearly stated. He came to die an atoning death for the sins of the world and conquer the grave with His bodily resurrection. This contradicts the *Gospel of Judas* that teaches Christ sought death to free himself from the imprisonment of his body.

Another Gnostic fundamental teaching is that the problem of

man is not sin but ignorance. Jesus is not a savior but a teacher who reveals this secret knowledge only to those worthy of this insight. Judas is considered worthy of this knowledge. Dr. Meyer writes,

“For Gnostics, the fundamental problem in human life is not sin but ignorance, and the best way to address this problem is not through faith but through knowledge. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus imparts to Judas – and to the readers of the gospel – the knowledge that can eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God.”[\[6\]](#)

Another Gnostic teaching is that since the physical world is evil, God did not create the physical world. Instead, He creates aeons and angels who in turn create, bring order to, and rule over the physical world. Since matter is impure, God does not enter directly into physical creation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus asks His disciples, “How do you know me?” They are unable to answer correctly. However, Judas answers saying, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.”

Barbelo in Gnosticism is the first emanation of God, often described as a mother-father figure. Since God does not enter into the material world because it is impure, Barbelo is an intermediary realm from which the material world can be created without contaminating God.[\[7\]](#)

Barbelo is clearly a Gnostic term and foreign to Christianity. Jesus stated in John 3:13 that He is from heaven. The Greek word is *houranos*. Other times, the New Testament writers see Jesus as sitting at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is from heaven with His Father with whom He dwells eternally.

Reasons the Gospel of Judas is Not Part of the New Testament

There are several reasons we should not consider the *Gospel of*

Judas inspired scripture. First, it is written too late to have any apostolic connection. The Apostles of Christ were given the authority to write inspired scripture. One of the requirements for inclusion in the New Testament canon was that the book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate. Since an apostolic connection was necessary, it would have to have been written within the first century. There is compelling evidence that the four New Testament Gospels are written in the first century A.D. (See my article [“Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”](#)) The *Gospel of Judas* is written in mid-second century A.D. so it is too late to be apostolic.

Second, inspired literature must be consistent with previous revelation. God is not a God of error but of truth, and His word would not present contradictory truth claims. The Gnostic philosophy in *Judas* is inconsistent with Old and New Testament teachings.

The Old Testament teaches that God created the physical universe and Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3). In the Genesis creation account, God created all things good. So contrary to Gnosticism, God created the physical world and He declared it good.

Gnosticism teaches that God would not create a physical universe because the material world is impure, so God creates aeons and angels. These beings in turn create the physical realm. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus reveals to Judas the creation of the world, humanity, and numerous aeons and angels. The angels bring order to the chaos. One of the angels, Saklas, fashioned Adam and Eve. The Gospel reads:

“Let twelve angels come into the being to rule over chaos and the [underworld]. And look, from the cloud there appeared an [angel] whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means rebel; others call him Yaldabaoth. Another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud. So Nebro created six

angels – as well as Saklas – to be assistants, and these produced twelve angels in the heavens, with each one receiving a portion in the heavens.”

It further states,

“Then Saklas said to his angels, ‘Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image. They fashioned Adam and his wife Eve, who is called, in the cloud, Zoe.’”

This contradicts the teaching in the Old Testament that God Himself created the universe. Then God created Adam from the earth, and his wife Eve from Adam.

The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts New Testament teaching as well. The Gospel teaches that the body is evil and that Jesus wished to escape His physical body. Jesus instructs Judas saying, “But you (Judas) will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” Jesus’ death through the assistance of Judas would liberate His spirit to unite with God. [\[8\]](#)

However, the New Testament teaches that Jesus did not wish to escape His body. In fact, Jesus taught that His resurrection would be a physical resurrection (John 2:19-22). In Luke 24:39, Jesus makes clear to His disciples that He has a physical body. “See my hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” In John 20 and 21, Jesus reveals it was a physical resurrection of the body that was on the cross. He invites Thomas in chapter 20 to touch His scars. If Jesus rose as a spirit, He would have been guilty of deceiving His disciples.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches a physical resurrection. He explains that Christ rose from the dead and over five hundred witnesses attested to the fact. He then explains that the resurrection body is a physical body but different from our earthly bodies. At the resurrection, Christians will have

glorified physical bodies, a clear contradiction to Gnosticism that seeks to escape the impure physical body. Paul did not teach Christians to escape the body, but look forward to the resurrection of the body (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Conclusion

Despite the hype in the media, the *Gospel of Judas* does not affect the historical reliability of the Gospels nor does it pose any threat to the deity of Christ. This gospel cannot be considered inspired scripture like the New Testament books. It was written in the late second century and therefore, not written by an Apostle of Christ or a close associate. Its teachings contradict previous revelation of the Old and New Testament. It presents very little information that could be considered historical. The *Gospel of Judas* gives us more insight into early Gnosticism, that is all. It presents no historic facts of Jesus that affect the New Testament in any way.

Notes

1. Dan Vergano and Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Long-lost gospel of Judas casts 'traitor' in new light," *USA Today*, 7 April 2006.
2. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: *National Geographic*, 2006), 5.
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 119-141.
4. Pagels, 134.
5. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 4-5.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo
Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 43.

Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer

Experimenting With Prayer

We pray for all sorts of reasons. When we've done something wrong, we may unburden our conscience by confessing our sin to God. When we're grateful for some blessing, we may offer up a prayer of thanksgiving. When we're contemplating God's work in creation, we may offer up a prayer of worship or adoration. But one reason that almost all of us pray is to ask God for something. Granted, we may often do this selfishly, or foolishly, or with all manner of wrong motives. But the thing itself, our making requests of God, is a perfectly legitimate thing to do. Indeed, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them (among other things) to make requests, such as "Give us each day our daily bread" (Lk. 11:3).

Although heaven undoubtedly receives millions of requests each day, there's possibly none more common than that which asks God for healing. While I was writing this article, my father was admitted to the critical care unit of a local hospital. Each day, I (along with many other Christians) prayed that he might be healed. But after two weeks, he went to be with the Lord. Naturally, this raises a very serious question. Do our prayers *really* make any difference, or are we just wasting our time?

Recently the *New York Times* ran a story with an intriguing title: "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer".^{1} "Prayers offered by strangers," the story began, "had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery. . . . And patients who knew they were being

prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like abnormal heart rhythms.” What are we to make of this? Are prayers for healing to no avail? Might they even be counterproductive?

In a fascinating essay titled “The Efficacy of Prayer,” C. S. Lewis questioned the value of such experiments. He realized, of course, that one could set up such an experiment and ask people to pray. But he doubted the *wisdom* of it. “You must not try experiments on God, your Master,” he wrote. He also observed:

Simply to say prayers is not to pray; otherwise a team of properly trained parrots would serve as well as men for our experiment. . . . You are not doing it in order that suffering should be relieved; you are doing it to find out what happens. The real purpose and the nominal purpose of your prayers are at variance. . . . The experiment demands an impossibility. {2}

Although on one level such experiments with prayer might be *interesting*, nevertheless, for those who have witnessed dramatic answers to their prayers, such studies aren’t likely to be *convincing*. But can we know whether or not prayer is *really* effective?

Providence or Coincidence?

A few years ago I was traveling to Kansas to attend a friend’s wedding. The sun was just about to set for the evening when I suddenly got a flat tire. I pulled to the side of the road, got out, and prepared to change the flat. I soon realized, however, that this was going to be a bit tricky. Although I had a spare tire, I had no tools to change it!

Now there have been many times when this would have really

made me angry. But on this occasion, I simply bowed my head in prayer and asked God for his help. I then sat down on the hood of my car to wait. I was a bit concerned because I knew it would soon be dark. But since there wasn't anything that I could do about *that*, I simply determined to trust the Lord.

In less than a minute, a friendly looking guy with two kids pulled to the side of the road. I explained my situation, and before I fully understood what was happening, he had his tools out and began to change my tire for me. Within about five minutes I was back on the road, praising God for his help in my time of need!

Now understandably, I looked upon this incident as a direct answer to my prayer. But can I really know if this interpretation is correct? Was it *really* God who helped me, in response to my prayer? Or would that man have stopped and changed my tire anyway? Unfortunately, apart from God telling me one way or another, there just doesn't seem to be any way to know for sure.

But I don't think we should be troubled by this. The fact that we can't *prove* a strict causal connection between what we ask God for in prayer and what actually happens in the world shouldn't really surprise us. After all, we can't *always* prove a causal connection between what we ask our neighbor for and what actually happens! Your neighbor may feed your cat while you're away on vacation because you asked. Then again, "Your neighbor may be a humane person who would not have let your cat starve even if you had forgotten to make any arrangements." [{3}](#)

Of course, it may sometimes be possible to prove a causal connection between what I ask my neighbor and what he actually does. But this isn't *always* the case. "Thus in some measure the same doubt that hangs about the causal efficacy of our prayers to God hangs also about our prayers to man. Whatever we get we might have been going to get anyway." [{4}](#) On the

other hand, the Bible also assures us that sometimes we don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2). So in the end, we may just have to learn to live with a bit of mystery about our prayers.

Whatever We Ask?

The most radical promises about prayer found anywhere in Scripture occur on the lips of Jesus. The nature of these promises is nothing short of staggering. Just listen to what Jesus tells his disciples: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Or again, "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23).

What are we to do with such incredible promises? On the surface, Jesus seems to be saying that he or the Father will do *whatever* the disciples ask. But is this *really* what Jesus meant? If so, it seems to raise a very serious problem. After all, do we *always* get what we ask for? And would it really be good if we did?

If my own experience can be trusted, then it seems to me that Christian philosopher William Lane Craig is quite correct when he writes, "If we are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, every one of us knows that sometimes God does not answer our prayers."[{5}](#) Indeed, he continues, sometimes God "*cannot* answer our prayers because Christians are praying for contradictory things."[{6}](#) He asks us to imagine "two Christian athletes playing on opposite sides in the Super Bowl Each would naturally be disposed to pray that his team would win, and yet both prayers could not be answered, for the two athletes would be praying for contradictory results."[{7}](#)

In addition, it's not very hard to think of examples in which it might be *unwise* for God to give us whatever we ask. After all, finite and fallible human beings are often inclined to

ask God for rather foolish things. It wouldn't always be best for God to give us whatever we requested. For example, suppose a godly young man who desperately wants to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary is praying that God will grant him a particular young lady to be his wife. But suppose that this young lady has a passion to serve the Lord here in some way. Finally, suppose that they would both be miserable and spiritually unproductive if they married each other, but they would both be deeply satisfied and productive in the work of the Lord if they each married someone else. Would it really be wise for God to grant this young man's request? It sure doesn't seem like it. Sometimes, as Garth Brooks observed, we can all thank God for unanswered prayers!

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 1

But if all this is so, then what's become of Jesus' radical promise to do whatever we ask in his name? It seems to me, quite simply, that Jesus' promise must be qualified somehow. But is it really wise to tamper with Scripture this way?

Let me suggest two responses to this. First, I think that when his words are properly interpreted, Jesus himself qualifies his promises right from the start. Second, the other qualifications I will mention are all firmly rooted in the Scriptures. In other words, we won't be tampering with the Bible. We'll rather be looking at its teachings to see if there are any qualifications expressed elsewhere in its pages that might qualify Jesus' promises in some way.

But let's go back to that first point. Notice what Jesus says in John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father." Immediately we see that Jesus hasn't really given a blanket promise to do whatever we ask. Rather, he's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask *in his name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.*

What does it mean to ask for something *in Jesus' name*? Many people treat this phrase as something akin to a magical formula. By saying the right words, in the proper sequence, they think that God is somehow obligated to give them what they've asked for. But this is certainly *not* what Jesus had in mind! Instead, to pray for something *in Jesus' name* is to pray for something that's consistent with the *character* and *purposes* of Christ in the world. As Merrill Tenney observes, "In prayer we call on him to work out his purpose, not simply to gratify our whims. The answer is promised so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."[\[8\]](#) So when Jesus promises to do whatever we ask *in his name*, He's not promising to do whatever we ask—period! He's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask that's consistent with his *character* and *purposes* in the world.

But there's more. As we search the Scriptures we find yet other principles that appear to qualify Jesus' promise. Dr. Craig mentions several of these in his book *Hard Questions, Real Answers*.[\[9\]](#) For instance, our requests might be denied because of unconfessed sin in our lives. The psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). Further, our requests might also be denied if they arise from impure motives. James states quite pointedly, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (4:3).

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 2

What are some more reasons why our requests to God might sometimes be denied?

First, our prayers may sometimes not be granted because of our lack of faith. Jesus told his disciples, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mk. 11:24). This verse makes it clear that the Lord expects our prayers to be joined with faith in his ability to grant them.

Second, as William Lane Craig observes, “Sometimes our prayers are not answered because, quite frankly, we don’t really care whether they are.”^{10} This was certainly *not* the pattern of the great prayers recorded in Scripture. Consider the example of Hannah, who prayed out of “great anguish and grief” for a son (1 Sam. 1:16). Or Daniel, who upon learning from the writings of Jeremiah the prophet “that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years . . . turned to the Lord . . . and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (Dan. 9:2-3). If we’re honest, many of us would probably have to admit that our own prayers are often just a pale reflection of the earnest examples we find in Scripture.

So too with perseverance in prayer. We tend to give up far too quickly and easily. Apparently, things weren’t much different in Jesus’ day. Indeed, he told his disciples the parable of the persistent widow “to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).

These are a few more reasons why our prayers to God might not be granted. But what if none of these reasons applies in our case? What if we’ve confessed all known sin, our motives are pure, and we’ve prayed earnestly, with perseverance, and in faith, and still our heartfelt requests to God are denied? What should we conclude then? That God doesn’t really care? Or that he doesn’t even exist?

Although we might be tempted to doubt God in such times, it’s important to remember one last qualification that the Bible puts on our requests to God; namely, they must be consistent with his will. The apostle John wrote that “if we ask anything according to his will . . . we have what we asked of him” (1 Jn. 5:14-15). But sometimes our requests to God just aren’t consistent with his will. In cases like these, although it may not be easy, we need to trust that our loving heavenly Father really does know what’s best and that he can be counted on to do it. In other words, we may not always know his mind, but we

can always trust his heart.

Notes

1. Benedict Carey, "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2006, <http://nyti.ms/advuuY>.
2. C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), 6.
3. Ibid.
4. *ibid.*, 7.
5. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 43.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 44.
8. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:146.
9. The remainder of this discussion is much indebted to William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 47-55.
10. Ibid., 49.

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

What Do Modern Historians Think?

“I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can’t believe He performed miracles.” Ever hear comments like this? Maybe you’ve wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar^{1}, has stated, “Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist.”^{2} Commenting on Jesus’ ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, “For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent.”^{3}

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus’ life and deeds developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus’ life, as it’s recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.^{4} Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and “exorcise demons.”^{5} But because many of these liberal scholars don’t believe in spiritual beings, they also don’t believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention

of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.[\[6\]](#) The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments believed that the "real" Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus' life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great's biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn't begin to develop until the following five hundred years.[\[7\]](#) A gross misrepresentation of Jesus' life occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus' life, and in light of his

very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples' teaching about Jesus' life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.[{8}](#)

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.[{9}](#) Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into

miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.[{10}](#) It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up were it not actually the case.[{11}](#)

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.[{12}](#) They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.[{13}](#) Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.[{14}](#) Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many

miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

“Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?” Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don’t believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don’t believe it’s possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus’ healings were primarily psychological in nature.[{15}](#) Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus’ resurrection.[{16}](#) Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there’s the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.[{17}](#) A careful reading of this text reveals many details that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John’s gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It’s possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany,

and then He tells us the town's approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.[{18}](#) Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.[{19}](#) If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such

Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.[{20}](#) If it were known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.[{21}](#) Apparently, the rabbi believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.[{22}](#) If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

Notes

1. Gary R. Habermas, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, by eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 124.
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and*

- The Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 61.
3. A.M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 63.
 4. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 124.
 5. See Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision*, 60.
 6. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 125.
 7. Craig L. Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
 8. Grant R Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 102, 103.
 9. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 124, 125.
 10. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley: Seastone, 1998), 21.
 11. Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 247.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 125.
 14. See the National Organization for Rare Diseases' official Web site at www.rarediseases.org/nord/search/rdbdetail_fullreport_pf (5/04/2006).
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 16. William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, by eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 247-261 and Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," Ibid., 261-275.
 17. John. 11:1-44.
 18. See Alan Humm, "Toledoth Yeshu," at ccat.sas.upenn.edu/humm/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html (2/17/1997).
 19. Ibid.
 20. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker*, 255.
 21. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 63.

Grief and Grace

Former Probe staffer Rick Rood, a hospital chaplain who understands the pain of losing his beloved wife, addresses loss, grieving and God's grace.

Over the past eight years that I've had the privilege of serving in the hospitals, I've had the occasion and privilege of interacting with thousands of grieving people, and to become more than casually acquainted with the many aspects of the "grieving process." In seeking to become better able to comfort those who are grieving, I've read many books and attended numerous seminars. But I've observed that while it's one thing to learn about the grieving process, it's quite another to experience it. Australian pastor Donald Howard wrote in the preface to his short book entitled *Christians Grieve Too* that though he was prepared for the death of his wife from cancer at the age of forty-six, he was "ill-prepared for grief."

Part of me didn't want to write this short essay. I've gotten in the habit of writing about some of the painful things in life the past year or so (though from the perspective of faith). And I wanted to write something happy, or even humorous. But I guess it's one of the occupational hazards of a hospital chaplain that you are constantly confronted with the realities of life that most of us would rather forget about (until it's no longer possible). This past year, I didn't have to go to the hospital to be confronted with this kind of reality. So, please bear with me as I "reflect" one

last time.

One of the things I've noticed about grieving people is that though all people do grieve their losses, everyone grieves differently. There must be a host of factors influencing how people grieve: the kind of relationship they had with the loved one, and its depth, the degree of dependence of one on the other (either the dependence of the survivor on the deceased, or vice versa), the presence of ambivalence in the relationship (the presence of anger as well as love), the degree of guilt (whether real or imagined) experienced by the survivor, the kind of loss (sudden, traumatic, preventable, etc.), the person's temperament and personality, gender, ethnicity, family background, past losses and accumulated grief, one's world view and spirituality. Wow. That's just the short list! Knowing just this much has kept me from comparing how one person grieves from another, and from making judgments about things I know little or nothing about.

There are many excellent books and resources available on grief and loss these days, quite a number from a Christian perspective. But few of them take into consideration in much detail what the scriptures tell us about grief, except for some passing references. My work and my own personal experience have prompted me to pay more attention to this topic in my Bible reading than I normally would. And especially this past year I have tried to listen more closely to what the Lord says to us about it through his Word. Some of what I've found so far has surprised me. All of it has encouraged me.

Grief and Loss

This first section will of necessity be a bit more somber. But it is a necessary prelude to what will follow! The first and most obvious thing one notices in reading the scriptures is that death follows sin, like winter follows fall. God had warned that Adam's sin would result in death (Genesis 2:17).

And it did. The solemn refrain “and he died” appears eight times in the list of Adam’s descendants given in Genesis 5. Death is indeed the “wages of sin” (Romans 6:23a). Death is not (as we are sometimes told) “a natural thing” or “just a part of life.” Death was not part of the created order when God pronounced it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). It is an aberration, an alien invader into God’s natural order. Isaiah describes death as a “covering which is over all peoples,” and a “veil which is stretched over all nations” (Isaiah 25:7). It is the great equalizer.

The second most obvious thing one notices is that God promises that death will one day be destroyed. The day is coming when “He will swallow up death for all time” (Isaiah 25:8), when the sentence of death will be “abolished” (1 Corinthians 15:26), and it will “no longer be” (Revelation 21:4). For all who are in Christ, this is our great hope!

The third thing that becomes apparent as one reads the scriptures is that while the sentence on death awaits its fulfillment, sorrow and grief follow death and loss as naturally as spring follows winter. If death were just a natural thing, it would be unnatural to grieve the resulting loss. But since death and loss are not natural, grief and sorrow *are*. They are the expression of pain resulting from the severing of relational bonds that were originally designed by God to be permanent. But because of sin and death, they no longer are. And it hurts.

It’s interesting that the first person described in the Bible as grieving is God! Scripture tell us that because of the evil and wickedness of man. God was “grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:6). We don’t understand everything about the emotional life of God. It is certainly not exactly like our own. But since we are created in his image, we should not be surprised to learn that our emotions are in some sense a reflection of his own. One of the most remarkable statements of scripture in this regard appears in Isaiah 63:9, “In all their affliction, he

was afflicted.” Edward J. Young, in his commentary on Isaiah (vol 3, p. 481) says, “God feels the sufferings of his people as his own sufferings.” In fact, every member of the Godhead is described in scripture as experiencing grief. Not only God the Father, as in these passages, but also God the Son. In reflecting on his rejection by the nation’s leaders in Jerusalem, it is said that He “wept over it” (Luke 19:41). At the tomb of his friend Lazarus He “was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,” and indeed that he “wept” (John 11:33, 35). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is described as pouring out His heart to God the Father “with loud crying and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). The Holy Spirit is described as experiencing grief as well. Compare Isaiah 63:10 and Ephesians 4:30, where we are warned against “grieving the Holy Spirit” by our sins. The psalmist says that God “remembers” our tears (Psalm 56:8). And it is even implied that He is in some sense moved by them (Isaiah 38:5, “I have heard your prayers, I have seen your tears”).

The fact that God experiences grief should not be seen as contradicting his sovereign control over all things. For it is clear that there are many things within God’s sovereign purpose that are nonetheless grievous to Him. In fact, there are many things within God’s purpose that are the cause of His anger and judgment.

If God, then, experiences grief, it should not surprise us to find many scriptures which describe God’s people as experiencing grief as well. Abraham is said to have “mourned and wept” over the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2). So Joseph at the death of his father Jacob (Genesis 50:1). The nation Israel at the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:8). Indeed, there is an entire book devoted to expressing the “Lamentations” of the nation Israel over the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. True, God’s people were admonished not to mourn in the same way that the surrounding pagan nations did at the death of their own. Though we do not understand today the

meaning of these practices, the Jews were forbidden to “cut themselves” or “shave their head” for the sake of the dead, as their pagan neighbors did (Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1). Nonetheless, there were traditional mourning practices among the Jews that were viewed as entirely appropriate (e.g., the covering of the head in 2 Sam 15:30, the baring of the feet in Isaiah 20:2, and the covering of the lip in Leviticus 13:45 and Micah 3:7.) The fact that Ezekiel was forbidden these outward expressions of mourning at the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:16-17) as a sign to the nation concerning their impending judgment (v. 24), indicates that such restraint was not considered normal.

In the New Testament we find similar expressions of grief on the part of God’s people. We’ve already noticed our Lord’s own grief. Indeed he was called “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3, cf. v. 10a). A curious description, if indeed Jesus rarely wept. One aspect of our growth in likeness to Christ is that we should be growing more transparent about our emotions, and more empathetic with those of others. We should also note the description of the “devout men” who when they buried the martyred Stephen “made loud lamentation over him” (Acts 8:2). A most interesting reference appears in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (a letter devoted to promoting the joy of the Lord), where he states that should his friend Epaphroditus have died as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced “sorrow upon sorrow” (2:27). Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God’s people have reason not to “grieve as those who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). But there is nothing in the New Testament which suggests that God’s people nonetheless do not or should not grieve the temporary loss of relationship with those they love. Theologian J. I. Packer has stated: “Grief is the human system reacting to the pain of loss, and as such it is an inescapable reaction” (*A Grief Sanctified*, p. 12).

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the removal of

grief and sorrow from human experience is tied very closely in scripture with the ultimate removal of death and loss. Compare the following statements from both Old and New Testaments. "He will swallow up *death* for all time, and the Lord God will wipe *tears* away from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8). "And He will wipe away every *tear* from their eyes; and there will no longer be any *death*" (Revelation 21:4). Though I believe (as we shall shortly see) there is substantial healing available from the Lord in our grieving now, its effects will not be entirely and completely relieved until the old order of life is fully replaced by the new.

With this context in mind, before moving on to a consideration of God's comforting grace, there is an intriguing passage in the Old Testament that we ought not overlook. It's found in the sometimes enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, *for when a face is sad a heart may be happy*. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure" (7:2-4 NASB). As with many of Solomon's sayings in this book, the italicized phrase is not easily understood. But the RSV rendering seems to capture its meaning well when it says, "By sadness of countenance the heart is made glad." Or as the NKJV puts it, "For by a sad countenance the heart is made better." What the writer appears to be saying is that genuine "recovery" from grief comes not by denying it or repressing it, but by giving appropriate expression to it. This is obviously something that the Old Testament saints understood, and practiced. And so may we. Someone well may ask how sorrow and grief can be consistent with the joy of the Lord. But it is interesting that St. Paul saw no contradiction in describing himself on one occasion as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10a). The former is the result of experiencing painful loss; the latter the result of contemplating the implications of the providence of

God—simultaneously.

Few people have experienced losses greater than those that befell Job. Perhaps his initial response to news of the death of his children provides something of a paradigm for us. “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20). Grieving, but worshiping. Grieving profoundly. Worshiping humbly.

Comfort and Grace

In God’s economy, if grief follows loss, then comfort follows grief. And this is exactly what we find in many passages of scripture. Among the things for which the Lord is said to have anointed his Messiah is “To comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah. 61:2b). Among those upon whom Jesus pronounced God’s blessing are those who mourn, “for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). A fact sometimes overlooked is that it is only those who mourn, who acknowledge their grief, who place themselves in a position of being comforted by the Lord. God’s comforting grace is the answer to our grieving heart.

One of the most endearing descriptions of the Lord in scripture is found in 2 Corinthians 1:3, “The Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” He is merciful and compassionate in nature. And He is the source of all genuine comfort and encouragement. The word used here for “comfort” is related to the word used to denote the Holy Spirit as the “Comforter” ... one called alongside to encourage and help (John 14:16,26). He is “the divine fount of all consolation to His people—the ‘all’ both excluding any other source of comfort and also emphasizing the complete adequacy of that comfort for every circumstance that may arise” (P. E. Hughes, *II Corinthians*, p. 13). The following verse states that God “comforts us in all our affliction” (v. 4a). “The present tense of the verb shows that this God of ours comforts us constantly and unflinchingly, not spasmodically and intermittently; and he does so in all our affliction, not just

in certain kinds of affliction” (Hughes, p. 12). Furthermore, God comforts us “so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (v. 4b). “Nor is the comfort received from God intended to terminate in the recipient: it has a further purpose, namely, to fit the Christian for the God-like ministry of comforting and encouraging others, whatever the affliction they may be suffering” (Hughes, p. 12). What a rich description of the comforting grace of God! From Him. To us. Through us.

But *how* does God’s comfort come to us? One means through which God’s comfort comes to us has been alluded to already. And that is that God identifies with us in our grief. We have noted above some of the passages that state this very fact. He “sympathizes with our weakness” (Heb. 4:15). “For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Psalm 103:14).

But beyond this, God has provided his word with a view to providing comfort in time of sorrow. “This is my *comfort* in my affliction, that your word has revived me” (Psalm 119:50). “My soul weeps because of grief; *strengthen* me according to your word” (Psalm 119:28). God’s words seem to find their way into our heart particularly when they are set to music: “Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Psalm 119:54). I have found great comfort in the music of praise and worship to the Lord. St. Paul says that “through perseverance and the *encouragement* of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). And concerning his teaching on our coming reunion with the Lord and with our departed loved ones, St. Paul says, “Therefore *comfort* one another with these words.” It is in part through letting the word of God “richly dwell within” us (Colossians 3:16) that we can gain access to God’s comforting grace. I have found it true in my own experience that the Word of God has been a river of grace to my heart.

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts

of God in our life. "O may your lovingkindness comfort me, according to your word to your servant (Psalm 119:76)." It is for the direct experience of the faithful love of God that the psalmist is praying here. And I believe God does comfort and encourage us by leaving his "fingerprints" on our lives in many ways during our days of grieving. He lets us know through his providential acts that we are not alone. That He is with us. That He loves us. That He has a purpose for us still (cf. Genesis 50:24).

As indicated in the passage examined above (2 Corinthians 1), much of God's comfort comes to us through his people. Later in this very letter, Paul tells us that he was comforted by God's sending his friend Titus. "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (2 Corinthians 7:6). When God provided Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, it is said that he "was comforted after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote that he was "refreshed" by his friend Onesiphorus who searched for him and found him (2 Timothy 1:16-17). It is often overlooked that much of God's grace comes to us, not only directly from His Spirit or through His word, but through His people. Peter tells us that it is as we steward the gifts God has given us in serving one another that we administer "the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). The Old Testament people of God seemed to put this understanding into practice in a very practical way. It was apparently their custom to surround their grieving neighbors with love and support by providing meals for them. The "bread of mourning" and "cup of consolation" were biblical terms meant to be taken in a very literal way (cf. Deuteronomy 26:14; Jeremiah 16:7; Hosea 9:4).

In what ways can God's people administer God's comforting grace? Certainly through following Jesus' example to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15b; contra Proverbs 25:20). By learning to be comfortable and patient with those who are actively grieving their losses. By learning to be "quick to

hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19b). By being a "ready listener." I've personally found that those who have simply "listened to my story" have greatly comforted me. I once heard a pastor speak of this effect as "healing through the laying on of ears." What a great phrase! When Job's friends first came "to sympathize with him and comfort him" (2:11b), it is said that "they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (2:13). (Oh that they would have remained in silent mode!) Later, Job made this telling statement: "For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty" (6:14). The thought is that lack of kindness can serve only to push people further from God when they are despairing. I've talked with many people in the hospital through the years who have distanced themselves from various churches. When I've inquired about what occasioned their departure, too often I have been told that it was during a time of bereavement. You can fill in the rest of the story. One way I've learned that we "speak the truth in love" is by being sensitive to the recipient's present ability to receive it and absorb it. ("I have many more things to say to you, *but you cannot bear them now*", John 16:12.)

Closing Thoughts

A rather obscure passage that has served to guide me in all of this is found in 1 Samuel 30:1-6.

"Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire; and they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing anyone, and carried them off and went their way. When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken

captive. Then David and the people who were with *him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep*. Now David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. *But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*"

What a great passage for summing up our thoughts in this article. We see first the experience of sudden loss. Then the expression of understandable sorrow and grief. They wept 'til there was no more strength in them to weep. But then, as he was able, *David strengthened himself in the Lord*.

It's that last phrase that I want to emphasize in closing. And there are two thoughts that emerge from it. First, the strength to move through our grief comes from the Lord. We go astray when we seek to find comfort for our grief apart from Him. I've seen many in the hospitals who have fallen into addictions or into unhealthy relationships due to their attempts to find comfort apart from the Lord. We've seen already some of the ways in which the Lord comforts and strengthens us in our grief, so that we can move on with our life and fulfill God's remaining purposes for us.

But second, as David did, we ourselves must take responsibility for obtaining God's comfort and strength. *David strengthened himself in the Lord his God*. Gaining God's comfort involves our active participation in the process. And if the people around us seem not to be helping us in this direction, then we must ask God to lead us to those who will. And seek them out. Not everyone is so equipped. A dear friend who had previously lost his wife told me, a good while before [I lost Polly](#), "Rick, your recovery will be your responsibility."

The rate of recovery is unique for every person. But there is

at least one passage in scripture which speaks of those who seemed to be stuck in their grief, "refusing to be comforted" (Jeremiah 31:15; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:7), in need of "restraining their eyes from tears" (Jeremiah 31:16), and of remembering that "there is a hope for (their) future" (Jeremiah 31:17). We do this as we utilize the means of grace which God provides, placing our faith in Him one day at a time, in pursuit of his purpose for the remainder of our days. Part of that purpose may be (probably will be) serving others who are still on the path of grief.

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).

Suggested reading:

Howard, Donald. *Christians Grieve Too*. The Banner of Truth Trust.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. Bantam Books.

Mitsch, Raymond R. and Lynn Brookside. *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*. Vine Books.

Packer, J. I. *A Grief Sanctified*. Vine Books.

Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. Zondervan.

Wright, H. Norman. *Helping Those Who Hurt*. Bethany House.

Wright, H. Norman. *Recovering from the Losses of Life*. Revell.

Wright, H. Norman. *Will My Life Ever Be the Same? Finding God's Strength to Hope Again*. Harvest House.

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The Gospel of Judas [Michael Gleghorn]

According to Wilford and Goodstein, in an article for the *New York Times* (April 7, 2006), "The 26-page Judas text is believed to be a copy in the Coptic language, made around A.D. 300, of the original Gospel of Judas, written in Greek the century before." *If* this is the same text referred to by the second century church father Irenaeus, then it probably dates to the second half of the second century. This would put it a full hundred years or so after the New Testament gospels all of which were authored in the second half of the first century A.D.

The evidence seems to indicate that the Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic document. These documents were universally rejected by the early church fathers and for good reasons. In the first place, unlike the New Testament documents (which date to the first century A.D.), the Gnostic texts are late, dating to the second to fourth centuries A.D. Because of this, the Gnostic documents, unlike the New Testament documents, were definitely not written by apostles or companions of the apostles. In other words, the Gospel of Judas is *not* an eyewitness account written by one of Jesus' original followers. Finally, the Gospel of Judas, like all Gnostic texts, contains teaching and elements which are clearly unorthodox and heretical, at least when judged by the standard of the New Testament gospels. It's for reasons such as these that the church fathers (very wisely, in my opinion) rejected these books as unfit for inclusion in the New Testament.

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This is a very quick and short response to the news

announcement about this “gospel.” For more in-depth analysis of why the Gnostic documents are not trustworthy accounts of the life of Jesus or His disciples, please see the Nag Hammadi section of “Redeeming The Da Vinci Code” [here](#). My colleague Patrick Zukeran has since written a longer assessment of this document [here](#).

Making Distinctions: A Warning Against Mixing Beliefs

Cafeteria-Style Religion

You’ve probably heard the term “cafeteria-style” religion. This is the religion of “a little of this and a little of that.” Beliefs are chosen from a variety of theologies or religions or philosophies because they seem right or appeal to us. Rituals or practices are chosen because we like them, they suit our tastes.

Sometimes this is a matter of Christians mixing the doctrines of various Christian theological traditions that results in an odd fit. But we won’t be talking about that this week. More often, and what is of more concern to us, is the way Christians sometimes mix non-Christian beliefs with Christian beliefs.

I saw this illustrated in a story published a few years ago about a young woman who had been a Methodist but became a Baptist after studying Baptist theology. She’d clearly put some thought into her decision which I applauded. However, it

turned out that, along with her Baptist doctrines, she also held the belief that Christianity isn't necessarily true for everyone. She was mixing Christian doctrine with a postmodern attitude about the nature of truth. Christians mix in a variety of false beliefs with true doctrine. Some Christians read horoscopes and take them somewhat seriously. Some base their ethical decision-making on what works. Some believe in reincarnation. And some, like the woman I mentioned, believe Jesus isn't the only way to God.

This isn't a new phenomenon. The apostle Paul faced the same kind of situation. Some Christians in his day were trying to mix Jewish and pagan beliefs into their Christianity. Paul discussed this issue in his letter to the church in Colossae. The second chapter of that letter will be the focus of our consideration (you might want to grab your Bible). In fact, may I be so bold as to ask you to read the chapter before you continue reading this? It's really more than a chapter: chapter 2, verse 1, through chapter 3, verse 4. If you have more time, go ahead and read chapter 1 also.

Paul starts chapter 2 by expressing his desire for the Colossians, that they "may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). The believers needed to be clear on this so they would be able to spot "fine-sounding" but deceptive arguments that led away from Christ.

Greek Philosophy

What were the false doctrines being taught in Colossae? What was being taught was a mixture of elements of Jewish beliefs and Greek philosophy with Christianity. The net result was that Christ was diminished in His person and His work on our behalf. This is clear from the corrections Paul makes in chapter 2 of Colossians and from the strong Christological

statement in chapter 1, verses 15-20.

Let's look first at the ideas imported from Greek thought.

From chapter 2, verses 21 to 23, we can deduce that people were being taught the pagan or Greek belief that physical matter is evil. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" People were taught to restrict themselves from certain pleasures that God didn't forbid. More importantly, if matter is evil, how could God come as a man in a physical body like yours and mine? If God couldn't become man, then Jesus couldn't be the divine Son of God. You see how that would be a problem!

The Colossians were also engaging in angel worship. Look at verse 18: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize." Some Greek philosophers had taught that the One, or the ultimate being, was too pure to get close to evil matter. So there were many levels of lesser beings between the One and the material universe. It was a simple step to associate angels with these beings. If people couldn't approach God, maybe they could these intermediate beings. Hence, angel worship.

Lastly, false teachers were promoting a special knowledge that apparently only a few had. Paul speaks of people puffed up with idle notions, in verse 18. He also mentions the "appearance of wisdom" in verse 23. He responds that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). This knowledge is available to all who are in Christ, and provides no reason for our being puffed up (1 Cor. 2:16).

These three beliefs developed into what is called Gnosticism.^{1} Paul saw this as a very grave danger. Why? Just because Christians might be deprived of some rightful pleasures? Well, that was a problem. But something much more important was at stake. Because of these beliefs, the person and work of Christ was diminished.

Jewish Beliefs

What was being imported from Judaism?

In chapter 2, verses 16 and 20 through 22, Paul cautions against a wrong emphasis on traditions carried over from Judaism including dietary restrictions, and the observance of religious festivals and the Sabbath. From this we can deduce that these things were being promoted by the false teachers. Apparently, from what Paul says in verse 11, they were also requiring circumcision.

Does this mean it is wrong to have traditions or to restrict our diet in any way? No, not at all. The point is that our standing before God is not related to such things. Christians are no longer under a legal code because Christ has taken it away and nailed it to the cross (v. 14). Paul wanted the Christians to know they were free from such things. Why? Well, the most important reason is that such works *don't work* for getting us to God. There's no reason to carry that burden on our shoulders; God put it on Christ's who has done all that needs to be done.

Not only were such things incapable of getting the Colossians to God, they couldn't even accomplish the goal of reforming people. Look at chapter 2, verse 23: "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." Paul doesn't just say that these things don't stand us in good stead with God; they can't even make us good people. Why? Because our root problem is our fallen nature. We can observe all the practices and rituals we want, but that won't change what we are inside. And what is inside will show itself as we sin again . . . and again . . . and again.

No, our problem isn't met by observing rituals or by putting our hopes in the wrong places such as in heavenly beings or in

our special knowledge. It is met in Christ in whom we have all we need. Verses 9 and 10 read: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete . . ." Literally, "you have been filled up." It is a passive verb. We have been given what we need in Christ.

The only way to God, given our fallen nature, is through Christ. The Colossians had turned back to worthless things. And these things weren't neutral in value; they served to turn the focus off of Jesus where it belonged.

Being Thinking Christians

What was and is to be done in response to this mixing of false with true? The solution lies in first knowing what is true. Speaking of Colossians 2 verse 2, nineteenth century biblical scholar John Eadie wrote this: "'The full assurance of understanding,' [or "full riches of complete understanding" in the NIV] is the fixed persuasion that you comprehend the truth, and that it is the truth which you comprehend."[\[2\]](#) Why is that so important? He goes on to say that if we *don't* have the full assurance that comes from understanding, we will be more likely to abandon what we believe today for something new tomorrow; new ideas will chase away previously held convictions. If we are "'ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,'" he says, 'then such [doubtfulness] and fluctuation present a soil most propitious to the growth and progress of error.'[\[3\]](#)

The apostles wanted the members of the churches to understand Christian beliefs. "The fixed knowledge of these things," Eadie writes, "would fortify their minds against the seductive insinuations of false teachers," who mix just enough truth with falsehood to make their teachings believable.

Imagine Paul setting on his left side the false beliefs and practices being taught in Colossae and on his right, Jesus and

His finished work. Pointing to his left he says, "You think matter is evil? Then [pointing to his right now] you might as well abandon Christ altogether, because it was His deity that made it possible for Him to obtain our salvation. You believe [pointing to his left] that worshipping angels will help? [Pointing to his right] Jesus, who is the exact image of God, God in flesh, to whom we have direct access, *created* the angels! [Pointing to his left] You think keeping all these rules will make you a good person? They don't! You just keep sinning. It is in Christ [pointing to the right] that your sin can be dealt with at the root."

We can believe in all manner of things in the current "true for me" way of thinking. But if something isn't true (in the classical sense), believing won't make it so.

Things to Be Aware of Today

The Christians in Colossae were guilty of folding in false beliefs with true ones. To avoid doing that ourselves, we need to be thinking Christians. We need to think *biblically*. The Bible is our final authority for faith and practice. Does the particular idea or activity find support in Scripture? We need to think *theologically*. If the Bible doesn't directly address a given idea, does it fit with what we *do* know about God, Christ, human nature, etc.,? We also need to think *logically*. We need to be able to think well, to spot contradictions between beliefs.

What false notions are we susceptible to today? I'll name just a few.

A major issue today is *religious pluralism*. We are tempted to follow along with our culture and think that Jesus is just one of several valid ways to God.

Subjectivism is a big problem that grows out of the skepticism of our age. If I can't know what's really "out there," I'll

just have to form my own beliefs based on my own thinking, feelings, desires, and circumstances. But our knowledge is too limited and our sin nature biases us in ways that lead us astray.

Pragmatic religion is also a temptation. “Does it work?” we want to know. If so, it’s right. We treat our lives like we would a machine: if what comes out at the end is good, then clearly the machine must be working correctly. This becomes an end-justifies-the-means way of living.

Therapeutic religion is also an issue today. It’s God’s job to make us happy. We think it’s more important for pastors to be counselors than theologians. We want them to fix our problems and make us happy again.

Then there’s *materialism*—a greater desire for wealth and material possessions than for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. There’s the temptation in an advertising age to *market* the gospel—fitting it to the sensibilities of the market rather than bringing those sensibilities under the scrutiny of the gospel.

Then there’s *style over substance*—we’re more concerned with being *hip* than with being *good*.

I could go on. Instead I’ll invite you to look for a copy of Os Guinness’s book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*[{4}](#) for a more extended discussion of these problems.

Even if you don’t read that book, let me encourage you to become conscious of your beliefs, and to become settled in your mind about at least the very basic Christian teaching, namely, that in Christ dwells the fullness of Deity, that in Him we have been made complete, that we are made alive with him through faith. And be on your guard so that “no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.”

Notes

1. Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. (Software; 166 in hard copy)
2. John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 111.
3. Ibid.
4. Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

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The Emerging Church

Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia, and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue. The leaders of this movement have

written and spoken at length regarding the necessity for change and have enumerated the types of changes that the church needs to make to survive and thrive in the years to come.

The difficulty for outsiders trying to weigh their arguments begins with trying to define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. Some see it as a loss of modernity's confidence in science and technology; others see it as something much deeper. One emerging church Web site uses a definition written by an English professor at a major university who writes that "Postmodernism . . . doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense."[\[1\]](#)

Postmodernity is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one's experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

Brian McLaren is a leader among those who argue that radical change must come to the church or else our culture will deem it irrelevant. He writes, "Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, [and] untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision."[\[2\]](#)

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

What's Good About the Emerging Church?

If the emerging church is anything, it's sensitive to the culture around it. Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society. These changes include the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. At the same time, Western civilization has experienced a dramatic decrease in biblical literacy.

The leadership of the emerging church argues against those who are tempted to respond to these changes by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D. A. Carson writes that "this is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians, and perhaps to God himself." [\[3\]](#)

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life. It has also led to a lack of humility regarding the limitations of language to communicate the mysteries of God's person and rule. The drive for theological precision has left the church divided and worn out, unable to offer the world a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

The emerging church is responding to what it perceives to be a lack of authenticity in our worship and Christian life in

general. They would agree with Carson who writes, “Sermons are filled with clichés. There is little intensity in confession, little joy in absolution, little delight in the gospel, little passion for the truth, little compassion for others, little humility in our evaluations, [and] little love in our dealings with others.”[{4}](#)

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church including all the “one another” admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As Stanley Grenz writes, “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”[{5}](#)

Concerns About the Emerging Church

Among the many concerns that have been written about the emerging church, we will focus primarily on just two issues. The first is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era, usually seen as the time period between the Enlightenment and the late 1900s, and the other is its teaching regarding what we can confidently know as believers.

Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. D. A. Carson writes that the movement’s “distortion of modernism extends, in the case of some emerging church thinkers, to a distortion of confessional Christianity under modernism.”[{6}](#) Emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the

rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Drained of any passion, the church in the modern era became a shadow of what it should be. Although there are times where this in fact happened, the modern era is far too complex to reduce it, or the manifestation of the church in it, to such a simple portrayal.

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. These ideas also impacted the church during this so called "modern" era. While many sought a more scientific faith and utilized the new tools of science to justify Christianity, others followed the lead of Søren Kierkegaard towards a more existential Christian life.

In its attack against modernism, the emerging church has condemned confessional Christianity as too abstract and rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often, it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case? C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet understood the power of story and the imagination.

The Problem of Knowing

This leads us into the second area of concern regarding the emerging church. How much knowledge about God, the human condition and salvation can we confidently possess? This question is directly tied to our concept of revelation. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can

be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

The most important criticism of the emerging church is its application of postmodern epistemology. Epistemology is the part of philosophy that asks, "How do you know that," or "How do we know anything at all?". Some in the emerging church movement have endorsed an extreme version of postmodern epistemology that creates an either/or view of knowledge that can be very manipulative.

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself. Since few of us would claim to have God's perspective or knowledge on an issue, they argue that we must admit that everything we claim to know is only a very limited personal perspective on the truth. In addition, what little we think we know is highly impacted, some say completely constructed, by the social group we participate in as individuals.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase "it might be true for you, but not for me" becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

There are other ways of thinking about what we know that sets the standard for knowing lower and yet maintains the sense of postmodern humility that is attractive to many.

One suggestion is called the “fusion of horizons” model of knowledge. Just like everyone’s view of the horizon is slightly different, everyone’s understanding of an event or idea is slightly different because it’s filtered through a person’s experiences and perspective. For example, let’s consider the case of a twenty-first century biblically illiterate person trying to understand Paul’s message in Romans.^[7] At first, there will be little overlap in how she and Paul understand the world. But what if she read the rest of the Bible, learned Greek, attended Bible studies, and read books about the first century Roman culture? Her understanding will never be exactly the same as Paul’s, but slowly she will get closer and closer to his world and develop a clearer picture of what Paul was attempting to communicate. She may choose to disagree with Paul, but she will understand him.

If this were not true, it would make little sense when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand.” The strong postmodern view of knowledge leaves us little hope that the knowledge of the gospel can be heard and understood.

Summary

Leaders of the emerging church argue that Christianity must focus more on authenticity and relationships and less on propositional truth or it will become irrelevant and ineffective. But is the focus on relationships and authenticity necessarily antithetical to propositional truth? Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church’s emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

The Jesus People U.S.A. attracted a wide following in the 70’s because of their emphasis on relationships, commitment to communal living, and the rejection of what they perceived to be an overly materialistic culture. Although the movement

included some fringe ideas, it has become part of the evangelical mainstream over the years and given churches another example of how to impact the culture with biblical truth.

Another significant movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible church movement of the '80s and '90s. Gene Getz's 1975 book *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. His thesis is that while the second chapter of Acts clearly communicates the critical functions of the church, the New Testament allows considerable freedom regarding how those functions are carried out. Getz's attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the threefold lens of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship. At the time, his use of various audio/visual tools for teaching from the pulpit and meeting in non-traditional facilities seemed quite radical. But his ultimate goal was for believers to break away from the calcified forms of doing church and to experience the fellowship and community that can be generated when we take all of the "one-another's" of Scripture seriously.

Another important contributor to this discussion was Francis Schaeffer. His book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* asked us to discern the difference between the functions of the church that are listed in Scripture and the forms that are used in different cultural settings. He wrote, "In a rapidly changing age like ours, an age of total upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolute guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutional, organized church."[\[8\]](#) Schaeffer had a huge impact on the baby boomer generation without sacrificing the truth claims of Scripture.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

Notes

1. Mary Klages, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado, www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
2. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), xi.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), 49.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid., 60.
7. Ibid., 116.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 1970), 67.