

The Tablet of Nabu: Another Confirmation of the Bible

This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find.

Dr. Irving Finkel, British Museum

The Discovery

A significant discovery related to Biblical history was made in the British Museums great Arched Room which holds nearly 130,000 Assyrian cuneiform tablets.^[1] Among the tablets, some of which date back nearly 5000 years, one tablet in particular, measuring only 2.13 inches wide or about the size of a small cigarette pack, was recently translated by Assyriologist and Professor from the University of Vienna, Dr. Michael Jursa. This cuneiform tablet was dated to 595 BC, or the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

When deciphered it named a high ranking official of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar named *Nebo-Sarsekim*. Nebo-Sarsekim is also named in the Book of Jeremiah 39:1-3. The passage reads:

*This is how Jerusalem was taken: In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. ² And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiahs eleventh year, the city wall was broken through. ³ Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, **Nebo-Sarsekim** a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon.*

Jeremiah identifies Nebo-Sarsekim as a chief officer of Nebuchadnezzar who was with the King at the siege of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Jeremiah records that several of Nebuchadnezzars

top officials took seats in the Middle Gate once they broke through the walls of Jerusalem.

The Assyrian tablet identifies Nebo-Sarsekim as the chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar, thus confirming Jeremiah's reference. The full translation of the tablet reads:

*(Regarding) 1.5 minas (0.75 kg or 1.65 pounds) of gold, the property of **Nabu-sharrussu-ukin**, the chief eunuch, which he sent via Arad-Banitu the eunuch to [the temple] Esangila: Arad-Banitu has delivered [it] to Esangila. In the presence of Bel-usat, son of Alpaya, the royal bodyguard, [and of] Nadin, son of Marduk-zer-ibni. Month XI, day 18, year 10 [of] Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.*[{2}](#)

The tablet is the financial record of Nebo-Sarsekim's gift of gold given to the Temple of Esangila, which was located in the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon.[{3}](#) This financial transaction took place in the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar while Nebo-Sarsekim was serving as the chief officer to Nebuchadnezzar. This was nine years before the siege of Jerusalem. Dr. Jursa states, "It's very exciting and very surprising. Finding something like this tablet, where we see a person mentioned in the Bible making an everyday payment to the temple in Babylon and quoting the exact date, is quite extraordinary."[{4}](#)

The Significance of the Discovery

The significance of this discovery is that the Tablet of Nabu is a text outside of the Bible that confirms Jeremiah's record of Nebo-Sarsekim as a historical figure. Nebo-Sarsekim is not a prominent figure, but the fact that Jeremiah was accurate on details such as these adds considerable credibility to the Book of Jeremiah. If a writer is accurate on minor details like this, we can be confident that other recorded events which may not have archaeological confirmation are also true.

Dr Irving Finkel, assistant keeper in the Department of the Middle East stated, "This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find. If Nebo-Sarsekim existed, which other lesser figures in the Old Testament existed? A throwaway detail in the Old Testament turns out to be accurate and true. I think that it means that the whole of the narrative [of Jeremiah] takes on a new kind of power." {5}

This discovery of the Tablet of Nabu is yet another among thousands of archaeological findings that confirm characters, places, and events mentioned in the Bible. Not only are major historical figures confirmed, but so have many minor characters such as Nebo-Sarsekim and others also been confirmed. Dr. Geza Vermes, the eminent emeritus professor of Jewish studies at the University of Oxford, said that such a discovery revealed that "the Biblical story is not altogether invented." He added, "This will be interesting for religious people as much as historians." {6} When a work has so much historical and archaeological confirmation, particularly when it comes to minor details, we can be confident that it is indeed a very accurate historical document. Discoveries such as this tablet continue to confirm the Bible's historical accuracy. Therefore, we can have greater confidence in the historical nature of the events where we may not have extra-biblical corroboration.

Notes

1. Nigel Reynolds, "Tiny Tablet Provides Proof for Old Testament," Telegraph.co.uk, 13 July 2007, tinyurl.com/2bbcac.
2. Ibid.
3. Dalya Alberge, "Museum's tablet lends new weight to Biblical truth," *The London Times* 11 July 2007, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2056362.ece
4. Ibid.
5. Nigel Reynolds, "Tiny Tablet."
6. Dalya Alberge, "Museum's tablet."

The Gospel of Thomas – A Christian Evaluation

Don Closson looks at the Gospel of Thomas, considering its relationship to the four gospels included in the New Testament. His Christian evaluation of this text demonstrates that it is a later work written in the fourth century after Christ and inconsistent with the original first century writings. Some of the ideas presented in this document were rejected by the early church of the first century.

What Is It, and Why Is It Important?

Anyone who has visited the Wikipedia web site, the online encyclopedia with almost two million entries, knows that while the information is usually presented in a scholarly style, it can be a bit slanted at times. So when I recently read its entry for the “Gospel of Thomas,” I was not surprised to find it leaning towards the view that this letter is probably an early document, earlier than the other four Gospels of the New Testament, and an authentic product of the apostle known as Didymus or Thomas. The two Wikipedia sources most mentioned in support of this position are Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, and the group of scholars known as the [Jesus Seminar](#). Both are known for their distaste for evangelical theology and traditional views on the [canon](#) in general.



What I found more interesting, though, is the background discussion on the article. Wikipedia includes a running dialogue of the debates that determine what actually gets posted into the article, as well as what gets removed, and here the discussion can be a bit more emotional. One contributor argues that no Christian should be allowed to contribute because of their bias and commitment to the canon of the New Testament. He adds that only atheists and Jews should be allowed to participate (no bias here). The discussion also reflects the idea that as early as the beginning of the second century, the Catholic Church was conducting a massive conspiracy to keep certain texts and ideas out of the public's hands and minds.

For those who have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, let me provide some background. A copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found among thirteen leather-bound books in Egypt in 1945 near a town called Nag Hammadi. The books themselves are dated to be about A.D. 350 to 380 and are written in the Coptic language. The Gospel of Thomas contains one hundred fourteen sayings that are mostly attributed to Jesus. Parts of Thomas had been uncovered in the 1890s in the form of three Greek papyrus fragments. The book opens with a prologue that reads, "These are the secret words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas, even Thomas, wrote," which is followed by the words "the Gospel according to Thomas."[\[1\]](#)

Why should Christians take the time to think about this book called by some "the fifth gospel"? Mainly, because the Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest texts found at Nag Hammadi, and because it is being offered by some scholars as an authentic form of early Christianity that competed with the traditional Gospels but was unfairly suppressed.

Dating and Canonicity

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that there was an early competition between the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, and that it was mishandled by the early Church Fathers. As a result, Christianity may have adopted an incorrect view of who Jesus was and what his message actually taught.

A key component in this debate is the question of when the Gospel of Thomas was written. Pagels defends a date earlier than the Gospel of John, which would put it before A.D. 90. She and others support this idea by arguing that Thomas is different in both form and content than the other gospels and that it has material in common with an early source referred to as Q. Many New Testament scholars argue that there existed an early written text they call Q and that Matthew and Luke both drew from it. Since Q predated Matthew and Luke, it follows that it is earlier than John's Gospel as well.

However, most scholars believe that Thomas is a second century work and that it was written in Syria.^{2} Thomas may contain sayings going back to Jesus that are independent of the Gospels, but most of the material is rearranged and restated ideas from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

An argument against an early Thomas is called the *criterion of multiple attestations*.^{3} It goes something like this. The many early testimonies that we have regarding the teachings of Jesus contain material on the end times and a final judgment. These early testimonies include Mark, what is common to Matthew and Luke (i.e., what is in Q), what is unique to Matthew, and what is unique to Luke. All include end times teaching by Jesus. Thomas does not. Instead, Thomas seems to teach that the kingdom has already arrived in full and that no future event need occur. The Gospel of Thomas shows the development of later ideas that rejected Jewish beliefs and show the inclusion of pagan Greek thought.

Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180.^{4} He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian's Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles.

Gospel Competition

Was there a marketplace of widespread and equally viable religious ideas in the early church, or was there a clear tradition handed down by the apostles and defended by the Church Fathers that accurately and exclusively communicated the teachings of Jesus Christ?

A group of Scholars sometimes known as the "New School" believe that the Gospel of Thomas is an alternative source for understanding who the real Jesus is and what he taught. As noted earlier, Elaine Pagels and the Jesus Seminar are two of the better known sources that defend the authenticity and early date of the Thomas letter. They believe that orthodoxy was up for grabs within the early Christian community, and that John's Gospel, written around A.D. 90, was unfairly used by Irenaeus in the late second century to exclude and suppress the Thomas material.

Pagels writes that Irenaeus, in his attempt to "stabilize" Christianity, imposed a "canon, creed, and hierarchy" on the church in response to "devastating persecution" from the pagan and Jewish population, and in the process he suppressed other legitimate forms of spirituality.^{5} Pagels admits that by A.D. 200 "Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who

understood themselves to be the guardians of the one 'true faith'." [\[6\]](#) But it is not entirely clear to Pagels that the right people and ideas won the day; we could be missing an important aspect of what Jesus taught.

Because of this she believes that we need to rethink what orthodoxy and heterodoxy mean. Just because Irenaeus labeled a set of ideas as heretical or placed a group of writings outside of the inspired canon of the New Testament doesn't necessarily mean that he was right. Pagels adds that Christianity would be a richer faith if it allowed the traditions and ideas that Irenaeus fought against back into church.

Evangelicals have no problem with the idea that there were competing beliefs in the early church environment. The biblical account mentions several: Simon the magician in Acts, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 1 Timothy, and the docetists, who believed that Jesus only "appeared to be in the flesh," are referred to in John's epistles. However, they do not agree with Pagels' conclusions.

The various religious ideas competing with the traditional view were rejected by the earliest and most attested to sources handed down to us from the early church. They were systematically rejected even before Irenaeus or the emergence of the canon in the third and fourth centuries.

Contents

Attempts to classify the contents of the Gospel of Thomas have been almost as controversial as dating it. Those who support it being an early and authentic witness to the life and ministry of Jesus argue that it offers a form of Christianity more compelling than the traditional view. For instance, in her book *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels explains how she discovered an unexpected spiritual power in the Gospel of

Thomas. She writes, 'It doesn't tell you what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.'[\[7\]](#) This statement comes after a time in her life when she had consciously rejected the teachings of evangelical Christianity. It also coincides with the height of the self-actualization movement of psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow which would have made the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas seem very modern. Pagels argues that just because Thomas sounds different to us, it is not necessarily wrong, heretical, or Gnostic.

So what does Thomas teach? On a spectrum between the traditional gospel on one end and full blown Gnosticism of the late second century on the other, Thomas is closer to the four traditional Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. It includes comments about the kingdom of God, prophetic sayings, and beatitudes, and doesn't contain Gnostic elements regarding the creation of the world and multiple layers of deity. However, its one hundred fourteen sayings portray Jesus as more Buddhist than Jewish.

According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, "the bulk of the gospel seems to reflect recastings of the synoptic material, that is, a reworking of material from Matthew, Mark, and Luke." In doing so, Jesus comes across more as a wise sage turning his followers inward for salvation rather than towards himself as a unique atonement for sin. For instance, Saying Three includes the words, 'When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.'" Bock concludes that 'In Thomas, the key to God's kingdom is self-knowledge and self-understanding. Spiritual awakening produces life.'[\[8\]](#)

Even if the Gospel of Thomas is a first century document, it is offering a different gospel. Early church leaders compared the teachings of Thomas with the oral tradition handed down from the apostles and with the traditional gospels and rejected Thomas.

Summary

Although the focus here has been the Gospel of Thomas, our discussion is part of a larger debate. This larger question asks which ideas and texts present in the first and second century should be considered Christian and included in what we call the canon of Scripture. In other words, are there ideas and texts that were unfairly suppressed by individuals or the organized church in the early days of Christianity?

In his book *The Missing Gospels*, Darrell Bock lists three major problems with the view held by those who think that we should include the Gospel of Thomas and other so called “missing gospels” into the sphere of orthodox Christianity.

First, this group undervalues the evidence that the traditional sources are still “our best connection to the Christian faith’s earliest years.”^{9} Elaine Pagels and others work hard to show that all religious ideas during this time period are human products and have equal merit. They also claim that we know little about who wrote the four Gospels of the NT, often implying that they too could be forgeries.

While there is a healthy debate surrounding the evidence supporting the traditional works, Bock asserts that, “the case that the Gospels are rooted in apostolic connections either directly by authorship or by apostolic association is far greater for the four Gospels than for any of the other alternative gospels,” including Thomas.^{10} He adds that “the Gospels we have in the fourfold collection have a line of connection to the earliest days and figures of the Christian

faith that the alternatives texts do not possess. For example, the Church Father Clement, writing in A.D. 95 states, 'The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the Word of God, they went forth.'[\[11\]](#)

Secondly, supporters of these alternative texts fail to admit that the ideas taught by the "missing gospels" about the nature of God, the work and person of Christ, and the nature of salvation were immediately rejected from the mid-first century on.[\[12\]](#)

Finally, those who support Thomas are wrong when they claim that "there simply was variety in the first two centuries, with neither side possessing an implicit right to claim authority."[\[13\]](#) Instead, there was a core belief system built upon the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus Christ.

As Bock argues, Irenaeus and others who rejected the ideas found in the Gospel of Thomas were not the creators of orthodoxy, they were created by it.

Notes

1. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 61.
3. *Ibid.*, 62.
4. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 67.
5. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, (New York: Random House, 2003), inside front cover.
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xxiii.

7. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 32.
8. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 166.
9. Ibid., 202.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 204.
12. Ibid., 207.
13. Ibid., 211.

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See Also:

[The Jesus Seminar](#) by Jimmy Williams

[A Brief Overview of The Gospel of Judas](#) by Patrick Zukeran

[Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip](#) by Michael Gleghorn

[Probe Articles Answering The Da Vinci Code](#)

Why Worldview?

Don Closson writes that developing a Christian worldview impacts both how we think and how we act. It can provide a foundation for great confidence for the Christ-follower.

Probe has called itself a worldview ministry since its birth in 1973. When my wife and I joined Probe in 1986, the term “worldview” meant little to our friends and family; they supported our work with Probe mainly because they knew that we were passionate about our faith and that the ministry involved defending Christianity on college campuses. Since then, the concept of a Christian worldview has become popular among evangelicals, resulting in numerous publications and worldview

ministries.



My introduction to the idea of a Christian worldview was through the works of Francis Schaeffer. Although the specific term “worldview” was not used much by Schaeffer himself, he presented Christianity as an all-encompassing system. What attracted me to the Christian faith was Schaeffer’s worldview approach. Christianity was not just a series of propositions or church program, or even just a gospel message; it was about all of life. This idea had a great impact on many baby-boomers who lived through the turbulent 1960s and were searching for meaning and purpose.

The concept itself is simple. Think back to what it was like as you woke up this morning. As you opened your eyes you began to experience sights and sounds that your brain needed to interpret. This process of interpretation begins with a framework of beliefs that act as a lens to the world around you. This set of beliefs is your worldview. James Sire says in his book *The Universe Next Door* that “A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions which we hold about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.” A worldview is made up of answers to the basic questions all humans face. Is there a God? What does it mean to be human? How do I know right from wrong? The way we answer these questions shapes our reality and provides context for our thoughts and actions.

For a Christian, a worldview involves more than just theological answers to these questions. Nancy Pearcey writes that “Genuine worldview thinking is far more than a mental strategy or a new spin on current events. At the core, it is a

deepening of our spiritual character and the character of our lives. It begins with the submission of our minds to the Lord of the universe—a willingness to be taught by Him.”^{1} Pearcey rightly notes that the foundation of any worldview is its assumptions about God. How we answer the God question affects how we answer all the other questions of life.

The History of the Concept

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington writes “In the post Cold-War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we?”^{2} In other words, what is our worldview?

The idea of worldview in Western culture begins with Immanuel Kant’s introduction of the German word *weltanschauung* in a published work in 1790.^{3} Kant only used the word once, referring to humanity’s intuitive understanding of the surrounding world. But others, especially German philosophers, took the idea and ran with it.

In his *Philosophical Letters*, Friedrich von Schelling wrote that “the chief business of all philosophy consists in solving the problem of the existence of the world.”^{4} Heidegger later added that the basic question all of us face is, “Why is there anything at all? Why not nothing?”^{5} A long list of philosophers, theologians, and poets eventually joined the discussion which peaked in the early 1900s.

At about the same time, the idea of worldview or *weltanschauung* entered the evangelical mind through the writings of James Orr. He used the term as a tool against dramatic changes that had occurred in Europe and America during the late 1800’s. Philosopher David Naugle writes that “During Orr’s life the West was undergoing its most

catastrophic cultural transition, passing through what C. S. Lewis has referred to aptly as 'the un-christening of Europe,' leading to the loss of the 'Old European' or 'Old Western Culture' and to the advent of a 'post Christian' age." {6} Orr understood that it had become necessary to present Christianity as a complete worldview over and against the worldview being developed by an increasingly naturalistic modern society. He presented his ideas at a lecture series at the United Presbyterian Theological College in Edinburgh in 1891, and later published them in *The Christian View of God and the World*.

Building upon the theological foundations of John Calvin, James Orr, along with the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, set in place a firm foundation upon which other well-known Christian thinkers added to. Gordon Clark, Carl Henry, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Francis Schaeffer all contributed to the argument that Christianity is best understood as complete vision of life. Their goal was the same as the apostle Paul's when he wrote to the church at Corinth, to encourage believers that "whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." {7}

Benefits of Worldview Thinking

What are some of the benefits of worldview thinking?

In his book *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, David Naugle argues that "Christianity is uniquely capable of satisfying the standard tests for truth that philosophers have devised and applied to any network of beliefs." {8} Christianity is coherent and comprehensive, its parts fit together well, and it takes into account all of our experiences as human beings. It also performs well in what is called the correspondence test for truth. Christianity rings true when its claims about human nature and morality and its other worldview components are compared to the world around us; it corresponds well with our daily experiences in the world.

Naugle also argues that the “God-centered conception of a Christian worldview spares believers from a naïve fideism, a scandalous anti-intellectualism, and a cultural obscurantism.”[{9}](#) In other words, a comprehensive Christian worldview does not reject reason or science. Within this worldview all truth becomes God’s truth and Christians have nothing to fear in participating in the investigation of our world and universe with non-Christians. It also helps us to avoid an unnecessary separation from the culture that God places us into; in fact, the Bible sends us into the world and encourages us to be salt and light. A correct understanding of the Christian worldview should give believers a cognitive confidence, an apologetic strategy, a cultural relevance, and a sound, spiritual basis for life in the coherent picture of God’s larger story.

A healthy Christian worldview helps believers to avoid dividing the world into the sacred and secular; instead one learns to see all of life as part of God’s creation and possessing a sacred aspect. Our culture has a tendency to separate facts and values; it claims that only science creates facts that are to be universally acknowledged while moral values are personal and limited in scope. A Christian worldview recognizes that biblical values are meant for all people everywhere and are not limited by culture or time.

As Naugle writes, “the notion of worldview has a mysterious way of opening up the parameters of the Bible so that believers might be delivered from a fishbowl-sized Christianity into an oceanic perspective on the faith.”[{10}](#) The concepts of creation, sin, and redemption take on a broader and more comprehensive meaning. Understanding the Christian worldview helps Christians to break free from their cultural constraints and to see their faith as world-sized rather than being bound by their church’s four walls.

Cautions and Temptations

In the last fifty years the concept of worldview impacted evangelical thinkers Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer, among others, and has become the focus for numerous ministries. Now that we've seen some of the benefits of this apologetic tool, we should turn to consider some cautions regarding its use.

The first danger is a philosophical one. The worldview concept sprang from a distinctly modern view of the world, a view that sees "nature itself as something to be known, represented, used, and discarded as needed."[{11}](#) Thinking "worldview-ishly" is an attempt to analyze a particular way of seeing reality and, in the process of doing so, one is required to objectify the world to some degree. This is contrary to the historic Christian ideal of seeing the universe in relation to its creator. The church has always described the world in sacred rather than materialistic language. The danger in using this term is that Christians might be tempted to see the world more in a secular philosophical setting than within the proper model of biblical stewardship.

A number of theologians have voiced cautions about using any language that is not "biblical" in helping to better understand our Christian faith. Martin Luther warned that "There is a danger in speaking of things of God in a different manner and in different terms than God himself employs."[{12}](#) Karl Barth adds that "The true God and His activity can never be perceived within the framework of a general philosophy."[{13}](#) He goes on to say that a worldview can never "substitute for genuine faith in the pure Word of God as the divine self-disclosure and exclusive source of an encounter with the living Lord."[{14}](#) These cautions must be taken seriously. We need to be careful that we are not living by a foreign frame of reference and squeezing the Scriptures into a man-made mold.

Finally, there is a spiritual danger. Even with good

intentions, we can end up mistaking the means for the end. C. S. Lewis once remarked, "There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself." [\[15\]](#)

We can become so enamored with our worldview system and the potential it has to change culture and point others to God that we become forgetful of the God we are called to worship. Just as systematic theologies should never replace the Bible itself, the worldview concept cannot be used as a replacement for the gospel. We are called to worship God and to have a relationship with Him, and not merely to believe in a list of propositions or ideas about God.

Even with these cautions, the worldview concept can be an effective instrument for broadening the faith of Christians and help them to share that faith with their neighbors.

Summary

What role can worldview play in building the confidence of believers and in communicating the gospel to unbelievers?

The idea of worldviews helps to inoculate Christians against the popular concept of religious pluralism in our culture. When one can see for oneself that the religions of the world have mutually exclusive answers to the basic worldview questions regarding ultimate reality, the world, human nature, and the question of good and evil, it is less tempting to think that somehow all religions are the same or that choosing a belief doesn't matter. Understanding other worldviews can help us to realize that every human perspective is built upon faith in a set of presuppositions, even scientific naturalism. This knowledge can help Christians to be more confident when they profess the uniqueness of Christ and the exclusive nature of the gospel.

Possessing a mature Christian worldview also provides a grid

for analyzing the culture we live in. Everything from the education we receive to the entertainment we consume comes with a worldview perspective and often contains a not very subtle attempt to change the way we see the world. Knowing this should help Christians to filter out ideas that are not biblical and to be more resilient against emotionally manipulative works of art.

One of the most important aspects of worldview thinking is that it provides a language for cross cultural dialogue and evangelism. A Christian can inquire about another person's worldview in a way that doesn't cause defenses to rise in the same way that asking about someone's religion can. And although we know that the Bible is the Word of God by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, worldview language can help us to show that Christianity is true to others without having to first prove the authority of the Bible.

Finally, once the worldview framework is understood and adopted it can provide a structure for a lifetime of learning. Even though grade-schoolers can be taught the basics of the Christian worldview, graduate level material can be assembled to help fill in and give texture to the framework. The question of what the Bible teaches regarding human nature alone can raise enough issues for many years of study, covering everything from free will to gender roles.

Christianity, conceived in terms of a worldview, can help give confidence to the believer and provide a language for entering into deep conversations with unbelievers that can lay the groundwork for sharing the gospel. The worldview concept is a tool that we can use to become a more effective ambassador for Christ.

Notes

1. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 24.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 21.
3. David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Eerdmans, 2002), 59.
4. Ibid., 60.
5. Ibid., 61.
6. Ibid., 6.
7. 1 Corinthians 10:31b
8. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, 340.
9. Ibid., 341.
10. Ibid., 342.
11. Ibid., 332.
12. Ibid., 336.
13. Ibid., 335.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 337.

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Is This the Last Christian Generation? – The Future of

American Christianity

Steve Cable joins Josh McDowell in asking about the future of the American church. Do Christians have the will to turn around the degradation of biblical beliefs and restore the church to a state of vibrant belief in Christ touching the lives of everyone in the country? According to Josh's research, we need to change the trends to have a chance of growing the church.

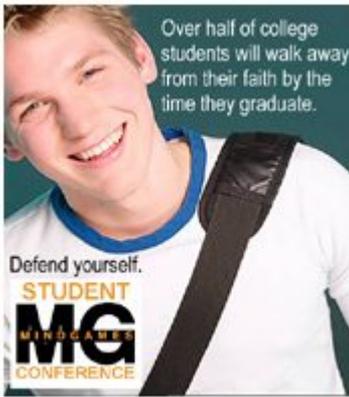
The Concern

Is this the last Christian generation in America? Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties stated recently in *Christianity Today*, "There are a lot of people who've had this nagging sense that we're missing the mark somehow . . . kids seem happy and willing to attend, and engage in our ministries, but five years from now, when they're in college or post-college, they just really aren't connecting with real faith, let alone church."

I know what you are thinking: "This is not new." Of course, I agree. For over thirty years, Probe Ministries has worked to create a strong foundation for Christian teens.

However, some believe it has reached a dangerous new level. This upswing has prompted Josh McDowell to co-write a new book with Dave Bellis. Josh states, "the decision to call this [book] *The Last Christian Generation* was not made lightly nor was it done for sensationalism. I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our young people – you will become the last Christian generation!"[\[1\]](#)

Is Josh's concern justified? Will this trend correct itself or will we follow in the secular footsteps of Western Europe?



How *are* we doing at converting church involvement by teens into a lifelong relationship with Christ? A 2006 study indicates that over eighty percent of today's teens attend church for a period of at least two months during their teenage years. What an opportunity! The bad news is that only one out of four of those churched youth are still spiritually engaged by age twenty-nine; [{2}](#) that is, they are still actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying. In comparison, roughly twice as many adults in their forties are spiritually engaged.

An earlier study looked at the beliefs of teens involved in evangelical churches. Over two-thirds of these young people believe

- that there is no absolute moral truth,
- that Christianity is about showing bad people how to live better,
- that there is no way to tell which religion is true,
- that Jesus is not the Son of the one true God.

And, over half believe

- that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Is it any wonder that these young people readily abandon their Christian involvement when confronted with a hostile culture?

The Causes

Let's consider some potential causes three out of four churched teens become disengaged from Christianity during their twenties.

One cause may be the way we define and measure youth ministry. As adults abdicate their training responsibility, our youth are isolated as their own congregation. The measure of success is numerical attendance rather than instilling a life long discipline for spiritual growth. Church becomes a series of fun activities interspersed with encouragement to avoid risky behaviors.

A second factor is primarily teaching topical lessons on Christian rules rather than laying a strong foundation of truth. As our teens move into college, professors, peers, and the popular media all portray authentic Christianity in a negative light. It takes a strong foundation to choose to endure hostility when one can adopt a so-called "private faith" and avoid the confrontation. As you know, soldiers participate in exercises simulating the most effective tactics of their opponents before being sent onto the battlefield. Yet, in training our teens, we often avoid exposing them to the tough questions lest some of them are put off by the experience.

A third factor is allowing teens to be content with a second-hand faith. In Joshua, we learn that "Israel served the LORD . . . all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD" (24:31). After these elders who had personally experienced the Lord died, most in Israel fell away from serving God. More recently, during the Welsh revival of 1904, over 100,000 conversions were recorded in less than five months. The impact was so pervasive that police duties were reduced to providing quartets for prayer meetings. A century later, church attendance in Wales is at an all-time low. Only nineteen percent of UK teenagers say they had a

religious faith (as compared to over seventy percent for US teens). Luis Palau summed up the Welsh experience by noting, "God has no grandchildren." Teens who attend church to live out their parents' faith find it easy to leave the faith to conform to the expectations of their new authority figures.

These three factors have been around since the inception of Probe. A new factor, somewhat unique to today's culture is a "distorted worldview filter" unwittingly adopted by our youth and adults. This filter tells them:

- Truth is relative, not absolute.
- Science and spirituality are at odds.
- Science confirms that I am nothing but insignificant dirt.
- An irrational, spiritual tradition can help me cope with this harsh reality.
- However, I am in no position to critically evaluate someone else's tradition.

With this distorted filter in place, even solid biblical teaching can leave teens unprepared to stand firm in their faith.

The Last Christian Generation lists some of the concepts distorted by this filter, for example: [{3}](#)

- Truth now means whatever is right for you.
- Tolerance means accepting that each individual's values and lifestyles are equally valid.
- Moral judgments mean bigoted attitudes we have no right to hold.

Many teens are synthesizing Christian teaching and popular culture into a new personal religion. In their 2005 book, *Soul*

Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,^{4} the authors found that religious teens tend to hold a vague group of functionally religious beliefs the authors termed “moralistic therapeutic deism.”^{5} Its key tenets are:

- God is distant and uninvolved in daily life.
- But I can call on God as a “cosmic therapist” when I have a problem.
- My purpose is to be happy and feel good about myself.
- If I avoid being an intolerant jerk, I will go to heaven.

Although these beliefs could be considered theistic, they definitely are not evangelical Christianity.

What happens when these beliefs are put to the test? I’ve known Julie^{6} all her life. Julie consistently attended youth group. She was also tuned into the popular culture. When her circumstances disappointed her, she turned to God as her “cosmic therapist.” When He did not change her circumstances to suit her, she decided that God was not worth her time. Instead, she chose to escape her circumstances through drugs. She had distorted the truth into a perversion that prevented her from having a solid relationship with her Creator.

The Correction

How should we respond to this disturbing trend?

Historically, much of youth ministry has been about getting the crowd in the door and keeping them involved. Recent studies show we are doing a good job at this function.^{7} But we are not doing well if we measure success by how many are still actively involved through their twenties. If the problem is not getting them in the door, it must be in what is happening once they are involved.

Josh McDowell suggests that we need to readjust both what is being taught and how it is being taught.^{8} We need to train our youth in a “relational apologetic,” meaning knowing and defending a belief in God as absolute reality revealed through the Bible *and* experiencing this truth lived out in their lives and through the example of others.

What should we teach? Although we should not ignore behavioral issues such as sex, drugs, etc., McDowell calls us to help our teens see the reality of God. If there is a God, it is of paramount importance that we seek to know absolute Truth with a capital T. Consistent with everything the tools of modern science can observe about our universe, they have rational reasons to believe that God has revealed Himself to us through His Word.

McDowell and Bellis suggest teens must learn to know Him as the God of redemption, relationships, and restoration.^{9} A clear understanding of each of these aspects serves an important role in countering the tenets of today’s teen religion which we defined above as “moralistic therapeutic deism”:

- Knowing the God of redemption tells them that good people don’t go to heaven; redeemed people go to heaven. Our definition of good is so shallow compared to a transcendent, holy God. We must rely on Him for redemption.
- Knowing the God of relationships tells them God is not a cosmic therapist, but a personal heavenly Father, intimately involved in all aspects of life.
- Knowing the God of restoration highlights that our earthly life is a brief precursor to eternity. This truth changes our central goal to creating eternal value in Christ.

Youth who can articulate these truths have taken a big step to repairing their distorted worldview filter.

Laying a Firm Foundation

McDowell points out that it is not only what we teach but how we teach it that is important.^{10} In America, we have adopted a Hellenistic [Greek] teaching model focused on communicating information and testing whether the student can regurgitate it. In addition, Christianity is often communicated as a set of behavior rules covering one topic at a time, rather than as a deep relationship emulating the character of our heavenly Father. Bits of knowledge and rules for behavior are not a comprehensive worldview.

In contrast to the Hellenistic model, the Hebrew model of Deuteronomy and Proverbs uses a set of ongoing object lessons, applying the character of God to each life situation. The entire inter-generational community is modeling their faith and articulating their biblical worldview. For this model to work, parents and youth leaders must continually express their reasons for believing that Jesus is the truth in a world that says there is no truth. Teens must experience a community of faith willing to trade in a life purpose of being happy and avoiding pain for a life purpose of building eternal value through serving Jesus.

This may sound like a daunting task, but there are ministries that want to come alongside and help in this process. Josh McDowell's ministry is developing study materials and training events specifically designed to fill this need. More information is available at truefoundations.com. Probe Ministries offers the Student *Mind Games* Conference, a week-long camp designed to equip students to stand firm in their faith through college and beyond.^{11} In addition, Probe offers speakers, curricula and other materials to help parents, youth leaders and students to articulate and live a relational apologetic. You can visit our website at Probe.org.

We know the church will survive and ultimately triumph at the return of Jesus, but there is no promise that America will

continue to have a high percentage of evangelical Christians. Four out of five youth in America are giving us a chance to influence the future. I believe God has called all of us to be a part of responding to that challenge.

Notes

1. Josh McDowell & David Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, Fla.: Green Key Books, 2006).
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3. Ibid., 1.
4. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2005).
5. Bruce Murray, "Understanding the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers," FACSNET, www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/youth.php.
6. Not her real name.
7. Ibid., 2.
8. Ibid., 1.
9. Ibid., 1.
10. Ibid., 1.
11. More information is available on the Probe Web site at probe.org/mindgames.

Truth Decay

We live in a world that has dramatically changed its view of truth. What is the impact of the worldview of postmodernism and the ethical system of relativism in our society and inside the church?

Three Views of Truth

We live in a world that has dramatically changed its view of truth, and thus have inherited an ethical system that denies the existence of truth. The worldview of the twenty-first century is postmodernism, and the dominant ethical system of the last two centuries has been relativism.

To understand this changed view of truth, we need to consider the story of three baseball umpires.^{1} One said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." Another said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." And the third umpire said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothing until I call them."



Their three different views of balls and strikes correspond with three different views of truth. The first is what we might call *premodernism*. This is a God-centered view of the universe that believes in divine revelation. Most of the ancient world had this view of true and believed that truth is absolute ("I call 'em the way they are"). By the time of the Enlightenment, Western culture was moving into a time of *modernism*. This view was influenced by the scientific revolution, and began to reject a belief in God. In this period, truth is relative ("I call 'em the way I see 'em"). Today we live in what many call *postmodernism*. In this view, there is a complete loss of hope for truth. Truth is not discovered; truth is created ("they ain't nothing until I call them").

Postmodernism is built upon the belief that truth doesn't exist except as the individual wants it to exist. Truth isn't objective or absolute. Truth is personal and relative. Postmodernism isn't really a set of doctrines or truth claims. It is a completely new way of dealing with the world of ideas. It has had a profound influence in nearly every academic area: literature, history, politics, education, law, sociology, linguistics, even the sciences.

Postmodernism, however, is based upon a set of self-defeating propositions. What is a self-defeating proposition? If I said that my brother is an only child, you would say that my statement is self-refuting. An only child would not have a brother. Likewise, postmodernism is self-refuting.

Postmodernists assert that all worldviews have an equal claim to the truth. In other words, they deny absolute truth. But the denial of absolute truth is self-defeating. The claim that all worldviews are relative is true for everyone, everywhere, at all times. But that claim itself is an absolute truth.

It's like the student who said there was no absolute truth. When asked if his statement was an absolute truth. He said, "Absolutely." So he essentially said that he absolutely believed there was no absolute truth, except the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth!

Postmodernism

Postmodernism may seem tolerant, but in many ways it is not. For example, postmodernists tend to be skeptical of people (e.g., Christians) who claim to know truth. Now that doesn't mean that it is hostile to religion or spirituality. Postmodernists have no problem with religion unless it makes certain claims about its religion.

Postmodernists tolerate religion as long as it makes no claim to universal truth and has no authority. But they are very

critical of those who believe there is one truth or an absolute truth. They are also critical of Christian missionaries because they believe they are "destroyers of culture." This is reminiscent of the TV show "Star Trek" that had "The Prime Directive" which prohibited those on the star ship from interfering with any culture. The assumption was that each culture must decide what is true for itself.

Related to this idea of cultural relativism is the belief in religious pluralism. This is the belief that every religion is true. While it is proper to show respect for people of different religious faiths, it is incorrect to assume that all religions are true.

Various religions and religious groups make competing truth claims, so they cannot all be true. For example, God is either personal or God is impersonal. If God is personal then Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could be true. But the eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) are false. Either Jesus is the Messiah or He is not. If He is the Messiah then Christianity is true, and Judaism is false.

Religious pluralism essentially violates the "Law of Non-contradiction." This law states that A and the opposite of A cannot both be true (at the same time in the same way). You cannot have square circles. And you cannot have competing and contradictory religious truth claims all be true at the same time.

Jesus made this very clear in John 14:6 when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Jesus taught that salvation was through Him and no one else. This contradicts other religions.

Postmodernism has also changed the highest value in society. We used to live in a society that believed in "Truth" (with a capital T). This has now been replaced by a new word with a capital T. And that is the word "Tolerance." We are told to

tolerate every view and value. Essentially, all moral questions can be summed up with the phrase: Who are you to say?

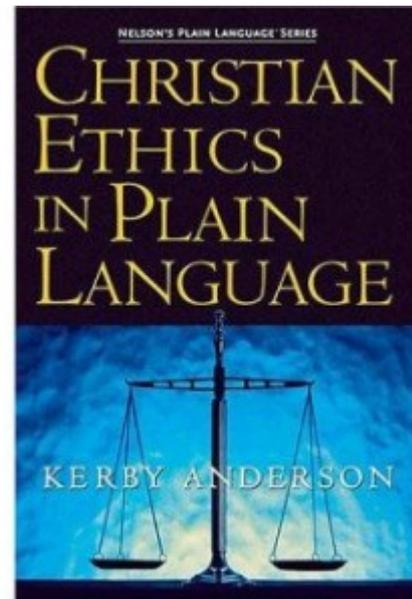
Moral Relativism

The worldview of postmodernism provides the foundation for moral relativism. Although a view of ethics as relative began in the era of modernism, it has reached full bloom in the era of postmodernism. If there is no absolute truth, then there is no absolute standard for ethical behavior. And if truth is merely personal preference, then certainly ethics is personal and situational.

Moral relativism is the belief that morality is relative to the person. In other words, there is no set of rules that universally applies to everyone. In a sense, moral relativism can be summed up with the phrase: "It all depends." Is murder always wrong? Relativists would say, "It depends on the circumstances." Is adultery wrong? They would say, "It just depends on whether you are caught."

Moral relativism is also self-defeating. People who say they believe in relativism cannot live consistently within their ethical system. Moral relativists make moral judgments all the time. They speak out against racism, exploitation, genocide, and much more. Christians have a consistent foundation to speak out against these social evils based upon God's revelation. Moral relativists do not.

There are two other problems with moral relativism. First, one cannot critique morality from the outside. In my book *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, I point out the problem with cultural relativism.^{2} If ethics are relative to each culture, then anyone outside the culture loses the right to critique it. Essentially that was the



argument of the Nazi leaders during the Nuremberg Trials. What right do you have to criticize what we did within Nazi Germany? We had our own system of morality. Fortunately, the judges and Western society rejected such a notion.

Second, one cannot critique morality from the inside. Cultural relativism leaves no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Reformers like William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King Jr. stood up in the midst of society and pointed out immoral practices and called society to a moral solution. Abolishing slavery and fighting for civil rights were good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

Not only is moral relativism self-defeating; it is dangerous. Moral relativism leads to moral anarchy. It is based upon the assumption that every person should be allowed to live according to his or her own moral standards. Consider how dangerous that would be in a society with such vastly different moral standards.

Some people think stealing is perfectly moral, at least in certain circumstances. Some people think murder can be justified. Society simply cannot allow everyone to do what

they think is right in their own eyes.

Obviously, society allows a certain amount of moral anarchy when there is no threat to life, liberty, or property. Each year when I go to the state fair, I see lots of anarchy when I watch the people using the bumper cars. In that situation, we allow people to “do their own thing.” But if those same people started acting like that on the highway, we simply could not allow them to “do their own thing.” There is a threat to life, liberty, and property.

Moral relativism may sound nice and tolerant and liberating. But if ever implemented at a societal level, it would be dangerous. We simply cannot allow total moral anarchy without reverting to barbarism. That is the consequence of living in a world that has changed its view of truth and established an ethical system that denies the existence of truth.

Impact of Truth Decay

What has been the impact of a loss of truth in society? There are many ways to measure this, and many ministries and organizations have done just that.

Each year the Nehemiah Institute gives the PEERS test to thousands of teenagers and adults. They have administered this test since 1988. The PEERS test measures understanding in five categories: Politics, Economics, Education, Religion, and Social Issues.^{3} It consists of a series of statements carefully structured to identify a person’s worldview in those five categories.

Based upon the answers, the respondent is then classified under one of four major worldview categories: Christian Theism, Moderate Christian, Secular Humanism, or Socialism. In the mid-1980s, it was common for Christian youth to score in the Moderate Christian worldview category. Not anymore.

Currently, Christian students at public schools score in the lower half of secular humanism, headed toward a socialistic worldview. And seventy-five percent of students in Christian schools score as secular humanists.

Take this question from the PEERS test as an example: "Moral values are subjective and personal. They are the right of each individual. Individuals should be allowed to conduct life as they choose as long as it does not interfere with the lives of others." The Nehemiah Institute found that seventy-five percent of youth agreed with this statement.

Let's also consider the work of George Barna. He conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only four percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that nine percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.[{4}](#) And when you look at the questions, you can see that what is defined as a biblical worldview is really just basic Christian doctrine.

George Barna has also found that a minority of born again adults (forty-four percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (nine percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.[{5}](#)

By a three-to-one margin, adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.[{6}](#)

Back in 1994, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey of church youth for Josh McDowell. Now remember, we are talking about young people who regularly attend church. They found that of these church youth, fifty-seven percent could not say that an objective standard of truth exists. They also found that eighty-five percent of these same church youth reason that "just because it's wrong for you doesn't mean its

wrong for me.”

George Barna says that the younger generation tends to be composed of non-linear thinkers. In other words, they often cut and paste their beliefs and values from a variety of sources, even if they are contradictory.

More to the point, they hold these contradictory ideas because they do not have a firm belief in absolute truth. If truth is personal and not objective, then there is no right decision and each person should do what is right for him or her.

Biblical Perspective

What is a biblical perspective on postmodernism? One of the problems with the postmodern worldview is that it affects the way we read the Bible.

Because of the popularity of postmodernism, people are reading literature (including the Bible) differently than before. Literary interpretation uses what is called “postmodern deconstruction.” Not only is this used in English classes on high school and college campuses, it is being applied to biblical interpretation.

Many Christians no longer interpret the Bible by what it says. Instead, they interpret the Bible by asking what the passage means to them. While biblical application is important, we must first begin by understanding the intent of the author. Once that principle goes out the window, proper biblical interpretation is in jeopardy.

So what should we do? First we must be prepared for the intellectual and philosophical battle we face in the twenty-first century. Colossians 2:8 says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

We must also be studying the Scriptures on a daily basis. Paul says the Bereans were “noble-minded” because “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Studies of born again Christians say that they are not reading their Bibles on a regular basis. An important antidote to postmodernism and relativism is daily Scripture study so that we make sure that we are not being conformed to the culture (Romans 12:2).

We should also develop discernment, especially when we are considering the worldviews that are promoted in the media. Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

The average student in America watches 22,000 hours of television before graduation. That same student also listens to 11,000 hours of music during their teenage years. Add to this time spent on a computer, on the Internet, and absorbing the culture through books and magazines.

Postmodernism is having a profound impact on our society. This erosion of truth is affecting the way we view the world. And the rejection of absolutes leads naturally to a rejection of absolute moral standards and the promotion of moral relativism.

Christians must wisely discern these trends and apply proper biblical instruction to combat these views.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31.

2. Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 11-15.
3. www.nehemiahinstitute.com/peers.php.
4. "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 1 Dec. 2003.
5. "The Year's Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 12 Dec. 2000.
6. "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 12 Feb. 2002.

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Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

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Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1996).

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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.

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.

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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 to 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.

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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. bid., 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.