

Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer

Experimenting With Prayer

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

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

Recently the *New York Times* ran a story with an intriguing title: "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer".^[1] "Prayers offered by strangers," the story began, "had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery. . . . And patients who knew they were being prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like abnormal heart rhythms." What are we to make of this? Are

prayers for healing to no avail? Might they even be counterproductive?

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

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

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

Providence or Coincidence?

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

Now there have been many times when this would have really made me angry. But on this occasion, I simply bowed my head in prayer and asked God for his help. I then sat down on the hood

of my car to wait. I was a bit concerned because I knew it would soon be dark. But since there wasn't anything that I could do about *that*, I simply determined to trust the Lord.

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

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

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

Of course, it may sometimes be possible to prove a causal connection between what I ask my neighbor and what he actually does. But this isn't *always* the case. "Thus in some measure the same doubt that hangs about the causal efficacy of our prayers to God hangs also about our prayers to man. Whatever we get we might have been going to get anyway." [{4}](#) On the other hand, the Bible also assures us that sometimes we don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2). So in the end, we may

just have to learn to live with a bit of mystery about our prayers.

Whatever We Ask?

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

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

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

In addition, it’s not very hard to think of examples in which it might be *unwise* for God to give us whatever we ask. After all, finite and fallible human beings are often inclined to ask God for rather foolish things. It wouldn’t always be best for God to give us whatever we requested. For example, suppose

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

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 1

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

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

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

What does it mean to ask for something *in Jesus' name*? Many people treat this phrase as something akin to a magical

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

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

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 2

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

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

Second, as William Lane Craig observes, "Sometimes our prayers

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

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

What Do Modern Historians Think?

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

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

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

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

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

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

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

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

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

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

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

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

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

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

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

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

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

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

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

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

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

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

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

Grief and Grace

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

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

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

last time.

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

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

Grief and Loss

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God—simultaneously.

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

Comfort and Grace

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

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

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

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

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

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts

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

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

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

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

Closing Thoughts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suggested reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Gospel of Judas [Michael Gleghorn]

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

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

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This is a very quick and short response to the news

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

Making Distinctions: A Warning Against Mixing Beliefs

Cafeteria-Style Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

Greek Philosophy

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

statement in chapter 1, verses 15-20.

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

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

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

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

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

Jewish Beliefs

What was being imported from Judaism?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Being Thinking Christians

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

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

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

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

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

Things to Be Aware of Today

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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The Emerging Church

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What's Good About the Emerging Church?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concerns About the Emerging Church

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

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

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

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

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

The Problem of Knowing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy

Dr. Michael Gleghorn asks, What if nothing in this world can satisfy our desire because the object of our desire is other-worldly?

The Riddle of Joy

Over forty years after his death, the writings of C. S. Lewis continue to be read, discussed, and studied by millions of

adoring fans. There seems to be something in Lewis that appeals to almost everyone. He is read by men and women, adults and children, Protestants and Catholics, scholars and laymen. A new movie, based on his best-selling children's classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is expected to be a mega-hit in theatres.^{1} It's difficult to think of another writer who is read (and appreciated) by such a broad spectrum of humanity as C. S. Lewis.

But what accounts for this broad, popular appeal? Doubtless many reasons could be given. Lewis wrote on such a wide variety of topics, in such a diversity of literary genres and styles, that almost anyone can find pleasure in something he wrote. Further, he wrote for a general audience. Even when he's discussing very heady philosophical and theological topics, he remains quite accessible to the intelligent layman who wants to understand. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Peter Kreeft, who notes that while "many virtues grace Lewis's work . . . the one that lifts him above any other apologetical writer . . . is how powerfully he writes about Joy."^{2}

Now it's important to understand that when Lewis writes of Joy, he's using this term in a very particular way. He's not just speaking about a general sort of happiness, or joyful thoughts or feelings. Rather, he's speaking about a desire, but a very unique and special kind of desire. In *Surprised by Joy*, his spiritual autobiography, Lewis describes it as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."^{3}

But *what* did he desire? The question haunted Lewis for years. What *was* it that he wanted? Through trial and error he came to realize that he didn't simply want a *feeling*, a subjective, inner experience of some kind. Indeed, he later said that "all images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon confessed themselves inadequate. . . . Inexorably Joy proclaimed, 'You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you or any state of you.'"^{4}

In an attempt to find the mysterious object of his desire, Lewis plunged himself into various pursuits and pleasures. But *nothing* in his experience could satisfy this desire. Ironically, these failures suggested a possible solution to Lewis. What if nothing in this world could satisfy his desire because the *object* of his desire was *other-worldly*? A radical proposal, and we turn to it now.

The Argument from Desire

What was Lewis to make of this rather mysterious, intense, and recurrent desire that nothing in the world could satisfy? Did the desire have any *real* significance? Did anything *actually* exist that could satisfy this desire? Or was the whole thing just a lot of moonshine? Although this question haunted Lewis for years and took him down many dead-end streets in pursuit of the mysterious object of his desire, he eventually came to believe that he had discovered the answer.

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he wrote of his remarkable solution to the riddle of Joy—the desire we are now considering—as follows:

It appeared to me . . . that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle—the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.[\[5\]](#)

In other words, Lewis reasoned from this intense desire, which nothing in the world could satisfy, to an object of desire that transcended the world. He gradually became convinced that

this Supreme Object of human desire is God and heaven!

Following Peter Kreeft, we can formulate the argument as follows:[{6}](#)

- 1. Every natural or innate desire we experience has a corresponding real object that can satisfy the desire.*
- 2. We experience an innate desire which nothing in this world can satisfy.*
- 3. Therefore, there must be a real object that transcends the world which can satisfy this desire.*

Now this is a valid argument in which the conclusion follows logically from the premises. So if someone wants to challenge the argument's conclusion, they must first challenge one of its premises. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, the argument has certainly had its detractors. But what sort of objections have they raised? Have they shown the argument to be unsound? And how have Lewis's defenders responded to their objections? We'll now turn to consider some of these questions.

Thus, it's important to understand that Lewis is *not* arguing that *all* our desires have real objects of satisfaction. He's claiming only that all our *natural* and *innate* desires do. Having clarified this issue, we'll return to consider objections to this first premise in a moment.

But first, what if someone objects to Lewis's second premise, namely, that *we have an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy?*[{10}](#) For example, what if someone admitted that they were not perfectly satisfied now, but believed they would be if only they had the best of everything money can buy? Well, unfortunately this experiment has already been tried—and has repeatedly failed. Just think of all the people who are very wealthy, but still not perfectly satisfied. Indeed, some of them are downright miserable!

But what if one of them isn't? What if someone claimed that he is perfectly satisfied right now? Admittedly, we can't really argue with such a person. We can only ask him to be honest—if not with us, at least with himself. Even so, however, this would not necessarily show that Lewis's argument is false. It may only show that the person who makes such a claim is somehow defective, like a colorblind person claiming that there is no such thing as color. If most people *experience an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy*, then Lewis's conclusion may still follow. But before we can be sure, we must first revisit that problematic first premise.

You'll remember that Lewis argued that *every natural or innate desire* (like our desire for food, drink, or friendship) *has a corresponding object that can satisfy the desire*. Thus, there really *are* such things as food, drink, and friends. There seems to be a correlation between our *natural* desires and objects that can satisfy them.

But there's a problem. As John Beversluis observed:

How could Lewis have known that every natural desire has a real object before knowing that Joy has one? I can legitimately claim that every student in the class has failed the test only if I first know that each of them has individually failed it. The same is true of natural desires.[{11}](#)

In other words, why think that every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it? Such questions appear to raise difficulties for Lewis's argument. So how have Lewis's supporters responded?

Peter Kreeft has written:

[T]he proposition "every natural, innate desire has a real object" is understood to be true because nature does nothing in vain, and this . . . is seen to be true by understanding

the concept expressed in . . . the word “nature.” Nature is meaningful . . . full of design and purpose . . . arranging a fit between organism and environment . . . desire and satisfaction . . . {12}

The Value of the Argument

In order to effectively reason from a deep, unsatisfied natural desire that nothing in the world can satisfy, to something beyond the world which can satisfy it, one must first know, or at least have good reason to believe, that *all* our natural desires *have* real objects of satisfaction. If they don't, then maybe there's just *not* any object that can satisfy the desire we're considering.

Now, of course, someone might well say, “Look, if all the natural desires we can check on, like our desires for food, drink, sex, and knowledge, have real sources of satisfaction, then wouldn't it be reasonable to infer that in the case of this one mysterious desire, which nothing in the world can satisfy, that there's also a real source of satisfaction?” Well, yes, I think this would be quite reasonable. Of course, the conclusion is only *probable*, not *necessary*. But in some places this is all Lewis himself claimed. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote:

The Christian says: Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists . . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. {13}

Now this is an interesting argument and it may suggest an additional premise which has been assumed, but not directly stated. For *why* does the Christian say that creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists? Isn't it because we believe that there's a benevolent

Creator and Designer of the natural world and its creatures? And if this is true, then it seems quite plausible that things have been intentionally *designed* so that there's a match between our natural desires and sources of satisfaction. And actually, there are very good reasons, completely independent of Lewis's argument, for believing that a Creator and Designer of nature *does* exist!

So it seems that the primary value of Lewis's argument may lie in showing us that it's reasonable to believe that our Creator and Designer is also the Supreme Object of our desire. And this resonates quite well with the oft-quoted words of Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."[\[14\]](#)

Notes

1. The film is scheduled to be released December 9, 2005.
2. Peter J. Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," in *G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis: The Riddle of Joy*, eds. Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 256.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1955), 17-18, cited in Kreeft, 253.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 220-21, cited in Kreeft, 253.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, (U.S.A.: Eerdmans, 1992), 204-05.
6. Kreeft, 250.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. For Kreeft's discussion see "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 267.
11. John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985), 19, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 267.

12. Kreeft, 269.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 254 (emphasis mine).

14. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 263.

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The Meaning and Practice of Tolerance

Don Closson investigates the ideas surrounding the tolerance controversy and offer principles to communicate to the culture around us why absolute tolerance, or what some call hyper-tolerance, might not be a wise choice.

Introduction

One of the most damaging charges aimed at Christians today is that we and our religion are intolerant. This is an effective insult, not because some Christians are indeed intolerant, but because Christianity itself is judged to be an intolerant (meaning lacking in virtue) faith system. The weight of this accusation is compounded by the fact that few things are looked down upon more in our culture than a person or group of people who are perceived to be intolerant. Unfortunately, it is also true that there are few words or ideas that are less well defined or understood in our society than the meaning of the word *tolerance*.



Critics of Christianity, especially of conservative Christians, often equate tolerance with moral virtue and intolerance as an unqualified evil. One admittedly liberal Christian commentator writes, “Conservative Christians have adopted the warrior mentality of Onward Christian Soldiers, and intolerance is nothing to be hidden under a white robe and pointed white hood: it’s to be waved proudly as a flag demonstrating Christian rigor and personal rightness.”[\[1\]](#) This author argues that conservative Christians have changed the meaning of the word *tolerance* from that of a virtue to that of a sin. She seems to imply that failure to tolerate any and every behavior or idea is a moral evil and that all intolerance is absolutely wrong, or at least that all conservative Christian intolerance is wrong. Since she is obviously intolerant of conservative right-wing Christian intolerance, we might surmise that some intolerance is morally acceptable some of the time, at least in some cases.

If all this is a little confusing, it might be because of the fog in our culture surrounding the meaning of the terms used when discussing the topic. In this article we will investigate the ideas surrounding the tolerance controversy and try to find principles that might help us to communicate to the culture around us why absolute tolerance, or what some call hyper-tolerance, might not be a wise choice.

You might be thinking that this issue doesn’t really matter. Who cares if our culture thinks that Christians are intolerant? It matters because we are Christ’s ambassadors, and the way that we are perceived by our neighbors can distort the message of reconciliation with God that we offer. There is no reason to add offense to the message of the Bible. Besides, there is an opportunity to help people to better understand the concept of tolerance and thus help to make a better

society for all of us to live in.

We shall see that there are good arguments for promoting true tolerance, and that a better society can be built upon a common understanding of the concept.

The Meaning of Tolerance

In his book *True Tolerance*, J. Budziszewski writes, “The specific virtue of true tolerance has to do with the fact that sometimes we put up with things we rightly consider mistaken, wrong, harmful, offensive, or in some other way not worth approval.”^{2} The word tolerance comes from the Latin *tolerare* which means “to bear” and carries with it the idea of a prudent, long-suffering silence. So what are we to make of a U.N. statement issued during its 1995 “Year of Tolerance” which declared tolerance to be “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human?”^{3} Do you notice what is missing? People think that tolerance includes affirmation. But affirmation is not tolerance. When you affirm or accept something, you do not need to tolerate it. Tolerance can only occur when you disagree with something.

Our current confusion has occurred because tolerance has been elevated to a place above all other virtues. Again, Budziszewski writes,

Our most gifted thinkers no longer treat tolerance as a queenly virtue to be guarded among many others equally precious, but as a shrewish virtue that excludes all the rest. For now we are told that the meaning of tolerance is *ethical neutrality* neutrality about which things are worth the love of human beings and which traits of character are worth praising.^{4}

Because many in our culture have become skeptical about knowing the difference between what is good and what is evil,

they argue that we are left with only two options when it comes to tolerance. We can either be ethically neutral, choosing to value equally all ideas and actions, or be a religious fanatic who claims to have perfect moral knowledge and who tries to impose absolute moral virtues on everyone else.

Actually, ethical neutrality is an impossible and irrational position to defend. Holding the position assumes that one has answered the question, "Why should I be ethically neutral?" Yet the construction of any answer violates the very neutrality being defended.

Another problem with moral skepticism is that the act of tolerance is dependent on some concept of what is morally good. One tolerates behavior or beliefs he or she disagrees with because of a higher or more important good. For instance, even though we believe that Christianity is true and that Christ is the only answer to mankind's problems, we encourage freedom of religion because it is only by freely choosing to believe, and not by force or coercion, that someone comes to true faith. Religious intolerance and coercion can actually cause someone to claim faith in Christ when none exists.

We argue that there is a third option, what we will call "true tolerance." How does this traditional view of tolerance work?

True Tolerance

Budziszewski argues that ethical neutrality based on moral skepticism is not a reasonable option. He writes, "If a skeptic finds reasons for tolerance, he finds it not by reason of the things he is skeptical about, but by reasons of the things he is not skeptical about."[\[5\]](#) In other words, one is tolerant because one is not ethically neutral. Someone cannot be neutral about everything and still have a reason to be tolerant because they would be neutral about tolerance as

well.

Is there another alternative? There is, what might be called the *traditional* view of tolerance, or what we will call *true tolerance*. Rather than ethical neutrality or a blind appeal to religious authority, true tolerance has to do with making judgments based on a concept of what is “good.”

Again Budziszewski writes,

True tolerance is not the art of tolerating; it is the art of knowing when and how to tolerate. It is not the forbearance from judgment, but the fruit of judgment. We may disapprove something for the love of some moral good—yet we may be moved to put up with it from still deeper intuitions about the same moral good or other moral goods, and on such deeper intuitions the discipline of tolerance is based.[\[6\]](#)

His point is that real tolerance always depends on judgment regarding what one values. It is never the result of moral skepticism. The act of tolerating something is not the heart of the issue. The key to understanding tolerance is to appreciate the process of weighing the different goals or moral ends that might be involved. These moral ends are often separated into three groups. The lowest order of ends includes health, happiness in the generic sense, good repute, peace, beauty and companionship. Next comes what can be called intrinsic goods like virtue and truth. Finally, the highest order good is the unconditional commitment to one’s ultimate concerns or worldview. The confusion surrounding this topic today might be so acute because we have turned this list of moral goods on its head; our society seems to value personal happiness and peace over virtue, truth, and commitment to a faith or worldview.

Even when we do decide to put up with behavior that we disapprove of, we can do so for good or bad reasons. At worst, we might tolerate boorish behavior due to cowardice, at best

because of concern for an individual's eternal well-being.

The Tolerant Society

What are some benefits that a society that has learned the virtue of true tolerance enjoys?

First, true tolerance understands that there are always limits to what should be tolerated, and that moral judgment is involved in setting these limits. Even those who endorse moral skepticism, arguing that there is no such thing as moral truth, seem to agree that society must not tolerate everything. They are quick to note their intolerance of slavery, genocide, and other violations of human rights. It is common sense that if tolerance is in fact unlimited, it becomes self-defeating. It would fail to limit the actions of those who are devoted to the destruction of tolerance itself. Muslims who insist on using the tolerance of Western nations to impose Sharia or Islamic law are an example. The defense of a tolerant society requires that it not tolerate certain behaviors, that it learns when to be intolerant.

It has become commonplace in America to label people as intolerant for simply having strongly held beliefs and for defending them against those who hold to contrary opinions. Actually, the "person [who] never disagrees with anyone about anything even when they know that the other person is being incoherent or dishonest or simply false is not being tolerant but instead is a coward." [\[7\]](#) When we confront people who are dishonest or merely wrong, especially when we do so with gentleness and respect, it shows that we take them and their ideas seriously. It also recognizes that they have real moral agency and that individuals should be held responsible for reasonable moral behavior and for the ideas that they endorse. In their book *The Truth About Tolerance*, Stetson and Conti write, "Confronting people with their own destructive behavior is not a sign of intolerance but is the sign of true

compassion.”[\[8\]](#) The same can be said for confronting ideas that are false and perhaps even dangerous to society.

While true tolerance encourages open debate, it expects people to defend their views within certain guidelines. Each person is encouraged to defend his or her beliefs about what is good for humanity by using rational arguments; true tolerance expects people to try to persuade others that their views are true. However, that doesn’t mean that others are expected to accept their understandings as true prior to being convinced by their arguments.

Finally, democratic governments allow or tolerate a broad spectrum of behaviors and self-determination rather than imposing totalitarian control. They tend to encourage the open debate of public policy issues like abortion and euthanasia, even by those who hold deep religious convictions about the topic. However, democratic governments are also clear about the behaviors that they do not tolerate by establishing clear legal codes and punishments that correspond with illegal behavior.

Is There a Christian Foundation for True Tolerance?

True tolerance is built into the very fabric of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although it is popular to believe that tolerance is a modern secular concept, perhaps original to the Enlightenment thinker John Locke, political philosopher J. Budziszewski argues that it is a Christian innovation. Even though Christians are not always obedient or even aware of their heritage, the Christian tradition represents “the source of the very standard by which their intolerant acts could be judged wrong.”[\[9\]](#)

As we mentioned above, true tolerance depends on positive beliefs, not moral skepticism in order to function and make

sense. Does Christianity provide a foundation for true tolerance? Actually, it provides the necessary beliefs on a number of levels.

First, Christians are called to imitate the model that Christ Himself gave us. God incarnate came to earth as a humble child giving us the perfect picture of love and tolerance on God's behalf. The perfect and holy God who created the universe stepped into time and space among sinful and rebellious humans to show His love and to win theirs. Both believers and unbelievers have been moved by the humility and mercy Jesus displayed towards others. His instruction to love your neighbor as yourself and the fact that He offered God's love to those considered sinful and not worthy of forgiveness sets Him apart from other religious teachers. Jesus didn't demand moral perfection to gain God's approval; He offered reconciliation based on His perfect sacrifice. Biblical Christianity recognizes the persistent human aptitude for self-centered behavior, and calls mature believers to battle against it. Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."[{10}](#)

Secondly, Christianity offers a universal message to every tribe and nation. No distinction is made based on gender, race, or ethnicity. God is calling all people to accept His gift of salvation, and the church should reflect that multicultural reality. The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that all people are made in the image of God and are not only important to Him but are redeemable through Christ's blood.

Finally, Christians can be tolerant of both the actions and beliefs of their neighbors because of their worldview or ultimate concerns. The task given to us by God is not to enforce a set of laws or style of worship, but to offer the message of reconciliation in Christ. Instead of separating from the sinful and dangerous culture that God has placed us

into, we are sent into the world by Christ to be salt and light so that many might hear the good news and respond to the offer of grace and forgiveness by trusting in Christ's payment for sin.

Notes

1. Teresa Whitehurst, "The Intolerance of Christian Conservatives," *CounterPunch*, www.counterpunch.org/whitehurst01252005.html.
2. *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgment*, J. Budziszewski (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 7.
3. *The Truth About Tolerance*, Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 141.
4. Budziszewski, xi.
5. Ibid., 10.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Stetson and Conti, 144.
8. Ibid., 145.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Philippians 2:3-4

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Will Winter Ever End? Groundhog Day and Modern Thought

Rick Wade takes us on a journey through the movie Groundhog Day to see what light it sheds on a modernist worldview. The protagonist's self-centered, materialistic, career-driven view

of life exemplifies the modernist thinking applies to actual life. As Christians, Rick points out a number of good examples from the movie that will help us better understand this view of the world.

Its All About Me

Did you see the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*? In this film, we meet Phil Connors, an arrogant and self-obsessed weatherman on a local TV station who is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report on the events surrounding Groundhog Day. Phil, played by Bill Murray, is rude to his co-workers, Rita the producer (played by Andie MacDowell) and Larry the cameraman (played by Chris Elliott). He has a condescending attitude toward the people of Punxsutawney who he calls hicks. Phil is very taken with himself. He tells his coworkers that a major network is interested in him, and at one point calls himself the talent. But now Phil is stuck in this awful assignment (too insignificant for someone of his stature) and only wants to finish up and get back to Pittsburgh. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately as things turn out), the team is trapped by a blizzard and forced to stay in Punxsutawney. The next day, however, something bizarre happens: Phil awakens to the same music on the radio and the DJs saying the same things as the morning before. Its February 2nd, Groundhog Day, all over again.

And thus begins Phil Connors nightmare. Every morning Phil awakens to February the second again . . . and again and again. We arent told how many times this happens, but it happens often enough that he is able to go from not being able to play the piano at all to being an excellent jazz pianist. What does Phil do with this strange situation?

Phil's responses to his circumstances illustrate some modern ways of thinking and one distinctly *unmodern* way. I'd like to

use this film to focus on these philosophies. This won't be a film review or an exercise in film criticism. *Groundhog Day* will simply serve as a mirror to hold up to modern thought.

In Phil Connors we see what Michael Foley, professor of early Christian thought at Baylor, calls a typical modern.^{1} He is self-centered, materialistic, egotistical, and career-driven. He exemplifies what sociologist Craig Gay calls modern man's desire for *autonomy* and . . . what might be called the *will-to-self-definition*.^{2} Gay quotes Daniel Bell who says that self-realization and even self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.^{3}

This describes Phil, but not only Phil. What is more obviously true to moderns than the idea that one must look out for number one? Modernists want to define themselves. Were the captains of our own lives, and were our own number one concern.

But with this strange turn of events, Phil, the one who likes to think of himself as on the rise, finds himself stuck in one place. Every day he faces the same routine. Nothing he does seems to matter, for time is no longer progressing. The past doesn't matter, for yesterday was like today. And as far as he knows, tomorrow will be the same.

What Goes Around . . . Goes Around

When Phil finally accepts his predicament, he asks his new drinking pals, Gus and Ralph, a question: What would *you* do, he asks, if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered? This question sets the stage for what follows in the film as Phil discovers over and over that nothing he did yesterday matters; nothing carries over.

But one can see something deeper going on here than simply an illustration of a boring, repetitive life. Perhaps not

incidentally it also serves on the larger scale to describe the situation many people face. The situation of Phil going nowhere is a subtle illustration of a major philosophical shift in modern times, namely, the abandonment of a *teleological* view of the world.

What do I mean by that? *Teleology* is the theory of purpose, ends, goals, final causes.^{4} Before Christ, Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle taught that there was design behind the universe; its forming wasn't just an accidental occurrence. In the West, with the rise of Christian theology, there came the understanding of the universe as made by God for a purpose. That is what *teleology* is: the idea of design with a goal in mind.

In modern times, however, that understanding is gone. We are taught that the universe is an accident of nature, and hence that we are, too. We weren't put here for a purpose; there is no goal to life beyond what we choose. Any meaning we have in life is meaning we supply ourselves. When this idea really sinks in, the ramifications are truly alarming. We want to have purpose; people with no sense of purpose have nothing to move toward. This idea was the root of the despair of existential philosophy. It drove thinkers such as Jean Paul Sartre to teach that the burden is on us to form our own lives, that to *not* do so is to live inauthentic lives. Although the existentialists tried to transcend this sense of meaninglessness, they weren't successful. The sense of loss that comes with thinking we have no purpose reflects what we know deep down because of being made in God's image: we were made by Someone for some purpose. To not have purpose necessarily diminishes our lives.

Phil Connors' life no longer has purpose. He is stuck in one place going nowhere, and it isn't a happy situation.

So what does he do? He looks to Rita for help. You're a producer, he says. Think of something. Rita advises him to see

a doctor. In modern times we typically look to science for the answer, in this case medical science. First, a medical doctor is unable to find anything wrong with Phil. Then a psychiatrist finds Phil's problem to be beyond his abilities. Science is supposed to be modern man's savior, but here medical science fails. Technology fails Phil, too. The highways are closed because Phil's own weather forecast is wrong he predicted the blizzard wouldn't hit Punxsutawney so he can't drive back to Pittsburgh. Long distance phone service is down so he is unable to call home. So Phil is stuck. This modern man cannot be rescued by modern means.

What is Phil's next move? He simply takes his hedonistic self-preoccupation to new levels. It's Feb. 2nd yet again, and Phil is out drinking with Gus and Ralph and reflecting on his predicament. After imbibing quite a bit, they get in a car to leave. As they drive away, Phil asks Gus and Ralph, What if there were no tomorrow? Gus responds that there would be no consequences no hangovers! They could do anything they wanted! Phil's eyes brighten. He can do whatever he wants! It's the same thing your whole life, he says. Clean up your room. Stand up straight. Pick up your feet. Take it like a man. Be nice to your sister. . . . I'm not going to live by their rules anymore!

And thus begins Phil's hedonistic binge.

It's All About Me . . . With a Vengeance

What does he do with this newfound freedom? When Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actions since there is no tomorrow he indulges his every whim in a sort of hedonistic binge. He eats like a glutton, seduces a woman, robs an armored car and buys a fancy car with the money.

Then he sets his eyes on the real prize: Rita, the producer. Day after day (or Feb. 2nd after Feb. 2nd!) he collects

tidbits of information from Rita about herself and about what her ideal man would be like. He then tries to fit the image himself in order to ingratiate himself to her with the hope of seducing her.

Michael Foley says that in this Phil becomes Machiavelli's prince.[\[5\]](#) In his book on political philosophy called *The Prince*, Machiavelli said a prince should always *appear* to be virtuous because that is what people expect. However, he said, the prince shouldn't actually concern himself with *being* virtuous, for that would often work against his own interests.

A prince should not necessarily avoid vices such as cruelty or dishonesty if employing them will benefit the state. Cruelty and other vices should not be pursued for their own sake, just as virtue should not be pursued for its own sake: virtues and vices should be conceived as means to an end. Every action the prince takes must be considered in light of its effect on the state, not in terms of its intrinsic moral value.[\[6\]](#)

This is Phil's attitude. He wants Rita, so he pretends to be the good man she desires. The end justifies the means, right?

As a society we have lost any sense of going somewhere. In the West, we've been taught to live for the moment, to savor the experiences of today. Yesterday is gone, and there is no ultimate tomorrow before us which will draw together the pieces of our lives into a meaningful conclusion. The world came about by accident and is going nowhere. In fact, we're told it's winding down to some cosmic death. The utopian vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was crushed by World War I. Following the devastation of the next World War, existentialist philosophers said we should create

our own sets of values. Increasing or at least maintaining our personal peace and prosperity now seems to be our highest ambition because, quite frankly, we have nothing else to hope for. What is left to do but enjoy ourselves as much as we can while here? Our national moral consensus goes little further than don't hurt other people unnecessarily, and we are left to our own ideas about what constitutes necessity. If there is nothing to hope for, today is all we have, so we pad our own nest and enjoy what we can out of life. I am the center of my universe, and it's your duty to not interfere.

To be honest, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the experiences life offers (given the limits of biblical morality and wisdom, of course). I recently read Francis Meyer's book *Under the Tuscan Sun* made into a movie starring Diane Lane. The movie barely scratches the surface of the pleasures of life in Tuscany described in the book: preparing and enjoying wonderful food; preparing the olive trees for next year's harvest, and at harvest time discerning when and how quickly to pick to avoid mildew; picking herbs like sage and rosemary from plants growing in front of the house for seasoning the evening's dinner; choosing the best local wine for the main course at dinner; taking in the smells and sights of a small Italian town; discovering a portion of an ancient Roman road or a wall built by the Etruscans; enjoying the company of friends and loved ones outdoors in warm weather, or gathered around the hearth in winter. The riches of such experiences have been lost to many in modern times.

Problems come, however, when *I* become the center of my ultimately purposeless world, when other people become objects to enjoy or reject as I might a certain food. It's bad enough when we become the centers of our own worlds. We go further than that and expect to be the centers of *others'* worlds as well! For some reason, we expect the lives of others to revolve around ours. But while we are crafting our own worlds, others are crafting theirs. What if my plans don't fit theirs

or vice versa?

Phil tried repeatedly to win Rita's affection to satisfy his own desires. Night after night Phil tries to woo her, and night after night she slaps him in the face when she realizes what he's up to. Phil can't manipulate Rita the way he wants to.

Phil is so much the center of his world that, at one point in the film, Phil the weatherman said he creates the weather! But of course he doesn't. He can't even predict it perfectly. If Phil can't control the weather which has no will of its own, how can he possibly control Rita who does? He could have learned something from Jim Carey's character, Bruce Arnold, in *Bruce Almighty* who could not manipulate the free will of his girlfriend Grace to regain her love.

It Has to Stop

So Phil cannot have what he really wants. What happens when one realizes that there is nothing lasting to hold onto? That is, if one can get hold of it at all? In the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the despair that comes from believing that there are no fixed and eternal values, existentialists tried to infuse individual lives with value by saying we create values ourselves. Other people, however, simply fell into despair and stayed there. That's what happened to Phil Connors. First he tried to solve his problem through medical science. Then he accepted the situation and tried to find fulfillment in the pursuit of pleasure. When that failed, he was lost.

A life with no tomorrow, and where yesterday and today don't matter, has no meaning because it has no explanation. But an explanation is what we crave. The discovery that there is no explanation is at the heart of what the existentialists called the *absurd*. Albert Camus said that a world that has no reason leaves a person feeling like a stranger. His exile is without

remedy, wrote Camus, since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.[{7}](#) As a result, for some people or perhaps for many the question that arises is, Why live at all? There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, said Camus, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.[{8}](#)

Even before Feb. 2nd, Phil's life was absurd; he just didn't know it. His past wasn't forming his future, and he had no sure promised land before him anyway. He would be what he made of himself (a very modern idea), but he didn't seem to be doing a very good job. One of the key characteristics of the modern mind is the idea that the past is to be discarded in favor of the future because things just have to get better over time. There were such high hopes in modernity! But while Phil had hopes for tomorrow, he really was going nowhere. The repetition of Feb. 2nd only mirrored his real life.

The absurdity of Phil's situation descended upon him on one of his many Feb. 2nds. Having tried to enjoy a life of no consequences, and having been rejected by Rita, Phil falls into despair. In his umpteenth report on Groundhog Day festivities he expresses his despair clearly. You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil, he says referring to the groundhog. I'll give you a winter prediction: It's gonna be cold, it's gonna be grey, and it's gonna last you for the rest of your life.

Phil could only think of one thing to do. Remember that if the groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, sees its shadow, winter will last another forty days. Phil reasons that, if winter is to end, the groundhog can't be allowed see its shadow again. So Phil the weatherman decides that Phil the groundhog must die. There is no way this winter is ever going to end, Phil tells Rita, as long as that groundhog keeps seeing his shadow. I

don't see any way out of it. He's got to be stopped. And I have to stop him. Here the parallel between the two Phils is made clear. To bring an end to winter, both the season and his own personal winter, Phil kidnaps the groundhog and drives off a cliff, killing them both. Neither Phil will now awaken to see his shadow again.

Or so he thought. The next morning, promptly at 6 AM, Phil awakens yet again to another Groundhog Day. A look of despair crosses his face. He gets out of bed, climbs into the bathtub with an electric toaster and electrocutes himself. But Feb. 2nd comes yet again. Phil tries many different ways to end it all. Later he tells Rita I've been stabbed, shocked, poisoned, frozen, hung, electrocuted, and burned. He keep trying to end his winter but he cant.

Although Camus raised the question of suicide, he didnt argue for it. He tried to persuade readers that there can be good reasons for living even though life as a whole has no meaning. But Phil, and many people in real life, have decided there is no reason to go on. Some dont go as far as suicide, but their nihilistic lives reflect the same idea: there is no meaning, nothing matters, nothing is of any value.

Is there any way out of this mess?

Phils Redemption

Phil Connors first two responses to his predicamenthedonism and despairwere failures. Once more he turns to Rita for help. He tries to prove to her he really is repeating the same day over and over. After seeing several convincing evidences that something strange really is going on, she offers to spend a day with him just to observe. Near the end of an enjoyable day, Rita takes a positive view and tells Phil that maybe what hes experiencing isnt a curse at all. It depends on how you look at it, she says.

With that little bit of encouragement, Phil's whole attitude changes. He now sees Rita not as an object to possess, but as a person of intrinsic value. Before, he wanted to use her; now he appreciates her. As she sleeps he whispers to her that he doesn't deserve someone like her. Now Phil has a purpose. Before he bettered himself to fool Rita; now his ambition is to be worthy of her.

So Phil sets about improving himself. He betters himself morally; Michael Foley sees here a turn toward an ethics of virtue. Phil begins doing good things for other people such as giving money and food to an old man who lives on the streets, changing a tire for a woman, saving a man's life, giving tickets to *Wrestlemania* to a pair of young newlyweds, catching a boy who falls out of the tree (who never thanks him, Phil notes!). Because he keeps repeating Feb. 2nd, Phil performs these good acts again and again. He also betters himself intellectually and artistically. And in the end, Phil wins Rita's affections.

Conclusion

In this simple film about a weatherman from Pittsburgh, we can see illustrated a few modernistic approaches to life. Having found himself in a purposeless existence, Phil looked for his salvation in science and in hedonistic pleasure seeking. Not finding it there, he fell into despair. With the encouragement of an upbeat lady as he called Rita, Phil decided to make himself a better man.

Several different religions have tried to claim the message of *Groundhog Day* as their own. Buddhists see Phil as the bodhisattva who must return to help others better themselves so they may all escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Jews see Phil as being returned to earth to do good works to help bring the world to perfection.

For evangelical Protestants this might sound suspiciously like

works salvation. But *Groundhog Day* isn't a Christian film; we shouldn't look for more in it than it offers. As I said at the beginning, it holds up a mirror to modern thought, and shows the failure of some contemporary beliefs.

Nonetheless, the film still offers us a reminder. In our zeal to proclaim salvation by faith alone, it's possible that we relegate the biblical admonitions to live good lives to too low a level. Our tickets are punched; we have our seats in heaven. As for now . . . well, you know how some say It's easier to receive forgiveness than permission. Maybe we just don't concern ourselves enough with living virtuous lives.

Groundhog Day illustrates the vacuousness of some modern ideas. But it also reminds us that living a good life *does* have its rewards: we are better people for the effort, and we become more attractive to people around us.

Notes

1. Michael P. Foley, "Phil's Shadow," *Touchstone* 17, no. 2 (April, 2004): 12.
2. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.
3. Daniel Bell "The Return of the Sacred: The Argument on the Future of Religion," in *British Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1977): 424, quoted in Gay, 192.
4. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Teleology," by Wilbur Long.
5. Foley, 13.
6. Sparknotes, "The Prince," www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/themes.html.
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.

Why We Shouldn't Hate Philosophy: A Biblical Perspective

Michael Gleghorn examines the role of philosophy in a Christian worldview. Does philosophy help us flesh out our biblical perspective or does it just confuse our understanding?

A Walk on the Slippery Rocks

For many people in our culture today, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians got it right: "Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks." But for some in the Christian community, they didn't go far enough. Philosophy, they say, is far more dangerous than a walk on slippery rocks. It's an enemy of orthodoxy and a friend of heresy. It's typically a product of wild, rash, and uncontrolled human speculation. Its doctrines are empty and deceptive. Worse still, they may even come from demons!

Such attitudes are hardly new. The early church father Tertullian famously wrote:

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic . . . Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. [\[1\]](#)

Should Christians, then, hate and reject all philosophy? Should we shun it, despise it, and trample it underfoot? Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy and urge us to avoid it? In thinking through such questions, it's important that we be careful. Before we possibly injure ourselves with any violent, knee-jerk reactions, we may first want to settle down a bit and ask ourselves a few questions. First, what exactly is philosophy anyway? What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about it? Might it have any value for the Christian faith? Could it possibly help strengthen or support the ministry of the church? Are there any potential benefits that Christians might gain from studying philosophy? And if so, what are they? These are just a few of the questions that we want to consider.

But let's begin with that first question: Just what *is* philosophy anyway? Defining this term can be difficult. It gets tossed around by different people in a variety of ways. But we can get a rough idea of its meaning by observing that it comes from two Greek words: *philein*, which means "to love," and *sophia*, which means "wisdom." So at one level, *philosophy* is just the love of wisdom. There's nothing wrong with that!

But let's go further. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. And throughout its history, philosophy has gained a reputation for the careful, rational, and critical examination of life's biggest questions. "Accordingly," write Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "philosophy may be defined as the attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions in order to obtain knowledge and wisdom about them."[\[2\]](#) So while philosophy may *sometimes* be a walk on slippery rocks, it may also be a potentially powerful resource for thinking through some of life's most important issues.

Beware of Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy

In their recent philosophy textbook, Moreland and Craig make the following statement:

For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work, but in speaking evangelistically on university campuses with groups like . . . Campus Crusade for Christ . . . Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. . . The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.[\[3\]](#)

This is a strong endorsement of the value of philosophy in doing university evangelism on today's campuses. But some might be thinking, "What a minute! Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy? And aren't we urged to avoid such dangers?"

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV), the apostle Paul wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." What does this verse mean? Is Paul saying that Christians shouldn't study philosophy? Let's take a closer look.

First, "the Greek grammar indicates that 'hollow and deceptive' go together with 'philosophy.'" [\[4\]](#) So Paul is not condemning *all* philosophy here. Instead, he's warning the Colossians about being taken captive by a particular "hollow and deceptive" philosophy that was making inroads into their church. Many scholars believe that the philosophy Paul had in mind was a Gnostic-like philosophy that promoted legalism,

mysticism, and asceticism.[{5}](#)

Second, Paul doesn't forbid the *study* of philosophy in this verse. Rather, he warns the Colossian believers not to be *taken captive* by empty and deceptive human speculation. This distinction is important. One can *study* philosophy, even "empty and deceptive" philosophy, without being *taken captive* by it.

What does it mean to be "taken captive"? When men are taken captive in war, they are forced to go where their captors lead them. They may only be permitted to see and hear certain things, or to eat and sleep at certain times. In short, captives are under the *control* of their captors. This is what Paul is warning the Colossians about. He's urging them to not let their beliefs and attitudes be *controlled* by an alien, non-Christian philosophy. He's not saying that philosophy in general is bad or that it's wrong to study philosophy as an academic discipline.

But doesn't Paul also say that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world? And doesn't *this* count against the study of philosophy?

Is Worldly Wisdom Worthless?

In 1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) the apostle Paul wrote, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Some Christians think this passage teaches that the study of philosophy and human wisdom is both foolish and a waste of time. But is this correct? Is that really what Paul was saying in this passage? I personally don't think so.

We must remember that Paul himself had at least some knowledge of both pagan philosophy and literature – and he made much use of reasoning in personal evangelism. In Acts 17 we learn that while Paul was in Athens "he *reasoned* in the synagogue with

the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17; NIV). On one occasion he spent time conversing and disputing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18). Further, when it suited his purposes, Paul could quote freely (and accurately) from the writings of pagan poets. In Acts 17:28 he cites with approval both the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Cilician poet Aratus, using them to make a *valid theological point about the nature of God and man* to the educated members of the Athenian Areopagus. Thus, we should at least be cautious before asserting that Paul was opposed to *all* philosophy and human wisdom. He obviously wasn't.

But if this is so, then in what sense has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? What did Paul mean when he wrote this? The answer, I think, can be found (at least in part) in the very next verse: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to know God*, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21; NASB). In other words, as Craig and Moreland observe, "the gospel of salvation could never have been discovered by philosophy, but had to be revealed by the biblical God who acts in history."[\[6\]](#) This clearly indicates the *limitations* of philosophy and human wisdom. But the fact that these disciplines have very real *limitations* in no way implies that they are utterly *worthless*. We need to appreciate something for what it is, recognizing its limitations, but appreciating its value all the same. Philosophy by itself could never have discovered the gospel. But this doesn't mean that it's not still a valuable ally in the search for truth and a valuable resource for carefully thinking through some of life's greatest mysteries.

In the remainder of this article, we'll explore some of the ways in which philosophy *is* valuable, both for the individual Christian and for the ministry of the church.

The Value of Philosophy (Part 1)

Moreland and Craig observe that “throughout the history of Christianity, philosophy has played an important role in the life of the church and the spread and defense of the gospel of Christ.”[{7}](#)

John Wesley, the famous revivalist and theologian, seemed well-aware of this fact. In 1756 he delivered “An Address to the Clergy”. Among the various qualifications that Wesley thought a good minister should have, one was a basic knowledge of philosophy. He challenged his fellow clergymen with these questions: “Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? . . . Do I understand metaphysics; if not the . . . subtleties of . . . Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?”[{8}](#) It’s interesting to note that Wesley’s passion for preaching and evangelism didn’t cause him to denigrate the importance of basic philosophical knowledge. Indeed, he rather insists on its importance for anyone involved in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church.

But *why* is philosophy valuable? What practical benefits does it offer those involved in regular Christian service? And how has it contributed to the health and well-being of the church throughout history? Drs. Moreland and Craig list many reasons why philosophy is (and has been) such an important part of a thriving Christian community.[{9}](#)

In the first place, philosophy is of tremendous value in the tasks of Christian apologetics and polemics. Whereas the goal of apologetics is to provide a reasoned defense of the truth of Christianity, “polemics is the task of criticizing and refuting alternative views of the world.”[{10}](#) Both tasks are important, and both are biblical. The apostle Peter tells us to always be ready “to make a defense” for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). Jude exhorts us to

“contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3; NASB). And Paul says that elders in the church should “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9; NASB). The proper use of philosophy can be a great help in fulfilling each of these biblical injunctions.

Additionally, philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology by bringing clarity and precision to the formulation of Christian doctrine. “For example, philosophers help to clarify the different attributes of God; they can show that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not contradictory; they can shed light on the nature of human freedom, and so on.”[{11}](#) In other words, the task of the theologian is made easier with the help of his friends in the philosophy department!

The Value of Philosophy (Part 2)

Let’s consider a few more ways in which philosophy can help strengthen and support both the individual believer and the universal church.

First, careful philosophical reflection is one of the ways in which human beings uniquely express that they are made in the image and likeness of God. As Drs. Craig and Moreland observe, “God . . . is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect.”[{12}](#) One of the ways in which we can honor God’s commandment to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37) is to give serious philosophical consideration to what God has revealed about himself in creation, conscience, history, and the Bible. As we reverently reflect on the attributes of God, or His work in creation and redemption, we aren’t merely engaged in a useless academic exercise. On the contrary, we are loving God with our minds—and our hearts are often led to worship and adore the One “who alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; NIV).

But philosophy isn't only of value for the individual believer; it's also of value for the universal church. Commenting on John Gager's book, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Drs. Moreland and Craig write:

The early church faced intellectual and cultural ridicule from Romans and Greeks. This ridicule threatened internal cohesion within the church and its evangelistic boldness toward unbelievers. Gager argues that it was primarily the presence of philosophers and apologists within the church that enhanced the self-image of the Christian community because these early scholars showed that the Christian community was just as rich intellectually and culturally as was the pagan culture surrounding it.[{13}](#)

Christian philosophers and apologists in our own day continue to serve a similar function. By carefully explaining and defending the Christian faith, they help enhance the self-image of the church, increase the confidence and boldness of believers in evangelism, and help keep Christianity a viable option among sincere seekers in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Of course, not all philosophy is friendly to Christianity. Indeed, some of it is downright hostile. But this shouldn't cause Christians to abandon the task and (for some) even calling of philosophy. The church has always needed, and still needs today, talented men and women who can use philosophy to rationally declare and defend the Christian faith to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). As C.S. Lewis once said, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."[{14}](#) These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't hate philosophy.

Notes

1. Tertullian, "The Prescriptions Against the Heretics," trans. S.L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology* (Vol. V in "The Library of Christian Classics"; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 31-32; cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.
2. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.
3. Ibid., 4-5.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 487.
6. Craig and Moreland, 19.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. John Wesley, "An Address to the Clergy," delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31; cited in Craig and Moreland, 4.
9. See Craig and Moreland, 14-17. I have relied heavily on their observations in this, and the following, section of this article.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 50; cited in Craig and Moreland, 17.