

# 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 aren't 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.<sup>{1}</sup> 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*.<sup>{2}</sup> Gay quotes Daniel Bell who says that self-realization and even self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.<sup>{3}</sup>

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.

# Its 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. Its 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 dont fit theirs or vice versa?

Phil tried repeatedly to win Ritas 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 hes up to. Phil cant 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 doesnt. He cant even predict it perfectly. If Phil cant 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 Careys 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. Thats 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.<sup>{7}</sup> 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.<sup>{8}</sup>

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 keeps trying to end his winter but he can't.

Although Camus raised the question of suicide, he didn't 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 don't 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?

# Phil's Redemption

Phil Connors first two responses to his predicament hedonism and despair were 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, Phils 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 doesnt 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 mans 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 Ritas 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](http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/themes.html).
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.

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# 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."[<sup>\[7\]</sup>](#)

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?"[<sup>\[8\]</sup>](#) 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.

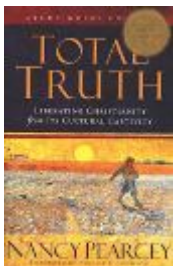
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# Total Truth – The Importance of a Christian Worldview

*Total Truth is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian's life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.*

## Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity



“This is a book of unusual importance by an author of unusual ability.”[\[1\]](#) This is a strong recommendation from any reviewer, but when the reviewer is best-selling author and Darwinian critic, Phillip Johnson, people pay attention. As well they should. Nancy Pearcey’s *Total Truth* is probably the most significant book of 2004. I pray its influence and impact will be felt for decades.

This is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian’s life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a

culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.

While the concept of worldview has wiggled its way into the consciousness of some in the Christian community, it remains largely a buzzword used in the context of political discussions and fundraising for Christian parachurch organizations. But politics only reflects the culture, so working to change the political landscape without changing the way we think is not as productive as some thought it would be.

One of the extreme threats to Christianity in this country is the effect of the culture on our youth and, consequently, on the future of the church in America. Pearcey says, "As Christian parents, pastors, teachers, and youth group leaders, we constantly see young people pulled down by the undertow of powerful cultural trends. If all we give them is a 'heart' religion, it will not be strong enough to counter the lure of attractive but dangerous ideas... Training young people to develop a Christian mind is no longer an option; it is part of their necessary survival equipment."[2](#)

Here at Probe Ministries we have recognized this threat for all of our thirty-two years of ministry. We continue the fight with our Mind Games conferences, Web site, and radio ministries. We address young people particularly in our week-long summer [Mind Games Camp](#). Students are exposed to the competing worldviews and challenged to think critically about their own faith, to be able to give a reason for the hope that they have with gentleness and respect.

In the rest of this article we will look at the four parts of Pearcey's *Total Truth*. In Part 1, she documents the attempts to restrict the influence of Christianity by instituting the current prisons of the split between sacred and secular, private and public, and fact and value. In Part 2 she deftly shows the importance of Creation to any worldview and

summarizes the new findings of science which strongly support Intelligent Design. In Part 3, she peels back the shroud of history to discover how evangelicalism got itself into this mess. And in Part 4, she revisits Francis Schaeffer's admonition that the heart of worldview thinking lies in its personal application, putting all of life under the Lordship of Christ.

## **The Sacred/Secular Split**

In the first part of the book, Pearcey explores what has become known as the sacred/secular split. That is to say that things of religion, or the sacred, have no intersection with the secular. Another way of putting it is to refer to the split as a private/public split. We all make personal choices in our lives, but these should remain private, such as our religious or moral choices. One should never allow personal or private choices to intersect with your public life. That would be shoving your religion down someone else's throat, as the popular saying goes.

One more phrase of expressing the same dichotomy is the fact/value split. We all have values that we are entitled to, but our values are personal and unverifiable choices among many options. These values should not try to intersect with the facts, that is, things everyone knows to be true. The creation/evolution discussion is a case in point. We are told repeatedly that evolution is science or fact and creation is based on a religious preference or value. The two cannot intersect.

The late Christopher Reeve made this split quite evident in a speech to a group of students at Yale University on the topic of embryonic stem cell research. He said, "When matters of public policy are debated, no religions should have a place at the table."[{3}](#) In other words keep your sacred, private values to yourself. In the public square, we can only discuss the

facts in a secular context.

Far too many Christians have bought into this line of thinking or have been cowered into it. Pearcey tells of a man who was a deacon in his church, taught Sunday School, tithed generously and was looked upon as a model Christian. Yet his job at the law firm was to investigate the contracts with clients no longer wanted by the firm to see what loopholes were available to get them out of the contract. He saw no link between his Christian faith and his work.[{4}](#)

We fall into these thinking traps because we don't understand worldviews in general and the Christian worldview in particular. Pearcey outlines a threefold test of any worldview to help get a grasp on what they mean for thought and life: Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Every worldview has some story of where everything came from – Creation. Then each worldview proceeds to tell us that something is wrong with human society – the Fall – and then each worldview offers a solution – Redemption. Using this tool you will be better able to diagnose a worldview and whether it speaks the truth.

## **The Importance of Beginnings**

The second part of Pearcey's book discusses the vitally important controversy over evolution and how it is taught in our schools. There is a clear philosophical filibuster masquerading as science in classrooms around the country.

In the opening chapter of this section, she tells the all too familiar story of a religious young man who is confronted with evolution in the seventh grade. Seeing the immediate contradiction between this theory and the Bible, the young man receives no help from teachers or clergy. He is left thinking that his "faith" has no answers to his questions. By the time he finishes school in Harvard, he is a committed atheist.[{5}](#)

The same story is repeated thousands of times every year. The



faith of many young people has been wrecked on the shoals of Darwinism. Whoever has the power to define the story of creation in a culture is the *de facto* priesthood and largely determines what the dominant worldview will be.

On *Probe* we have discussed the problems of evolution and the evidence for Intelligent Design numerous times. Now Pearcey makes the case that this is far more than a scientific discussion. It is at the heart of the culture war we are immersed in. Darwinism has had a far reaching impact on American thought, and we need a better grasp of the issue to better fight the battle we are in.

To show the prevalence of naturalistic Darwinian thinking Pearcey quotes from a Berenstain Bears book on nature titled *The Bears Nature Guide*. "As the book opens, the Bear family invites us to go on a nature walk; after turning a few pages, we come to a two-page spread with a dazzling sunrise and the words spelled out in capital letters: Nature... is all that IS, or WAS, or EVER WILL BE." [\[6\]](#) Clearly this is presented as scientific fact and should not be doubted.

Pearcey guides the reader through a well presented description of the major problems with the evidence concerning Darwinism. But more importantly, she clearly shows that the problem is not just the evidence. Most Darwinists accept the meager evidence because their worldview demands it. Naturalism requires a naturalistic story of creation, and since they are convinced of naturalism, some form of evolution must be true. She quotes a Kansas State University professor as saying, "Even if all the data point to an intelligent designer, such an hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic." [\[7\]](#)

Pearcey goes on to show that Darwinism has continued to progressively influence nearly all realms of intellectual endeavor. From biology to anthropology to ethics to law to philosophy to even theology, Darwinism shows its muscle.

Darwinism is indeed a universal acid that systematically cuts through all branches of human thought. We ignore it at our peril.

## **How Did We Get in This Mess?**

Nancy Pearcey titles the third section of her book, "How We Lost Our Minds." She begins with a typical story of conversion from sin of a young man named Denzel. As Denzel seeks to grow and understand his newfound faith, he is stymied by leaders who can't answer his questions and is told to just have faith in the simple things.

When Denzel gets a job, he is confused by those from other religions and cults who all seem to have answers for people's questions. Only the Christians are unable to defend themselves from skeptics and believers of other stripes. Eventually he finds work at a Christian bookstore and finds the nectar he has been hungry for. But he had to look and look hard. Denzel has learned that many in the evangelical movement have a largely anti-intellectual bias.

Where did that come from? Today one can still hear preachers of various stripes make fun of those of higher learning whether philosophers, scientists, or even theologians. The root of this anti-intellectualism is found in the early days of our country. America was founded by idealists and individualists. Many had suffered religious persecution and were looking for someplace to practice their faith apart from ecclesiastical authority. The democratic ideals of the original colonies and the newly independent United States of America seemed like just the right place.

When the early American seminaries became infected with the theological liberalism spawned by the Enlightenment, many rebelled against any form of church hierarchy, believing it couldn't be trusted. With the opening of the great frontiers,

great opportunities for evangelism sprouted at the same time. Out of this came the First Great Awakening. The early revivalists directed their message to individuals, exhorting them to make independent decisions, Jonathan Edwards being a notable exception. Emotional and experiential conversions brought bigger crowds. Some began to even see a formula that brought about large numbers of conversions.

There arose a suspicion that Christianity had become hopelessly corrupted sometime after the apostolic age. The task at hand was to leapfrog back 1,800 years to restore the original purity of the church. Suddenly, the great works of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others were seen as unnecessary.<sup>{8}</sup> Evangelicals were cut off from their historical and theological roots. The evangelical movement as a whole became focused on rugged American self-interest and self-assertion, a strong principle of Darwinian naturalism.

This is still evident today in the prevalence of church-hoppers. Many view their church through an individualistic grid which says if the church leadership doesn't do things the way I would prefer and doesn't listen to me, I will take my family and go elsewhere.

The roots of anti-intellectualism run deep and find surprisingly fresh support from Darwinian naturalism. So how do we recover?

## Living It Out

In the final chapter of *Total Truth*, Pearcey rings out a call to authenticity, not just with respect to the intellectual underpinnings of the Christian worldview, but also to how we live it out.

On the final page she cites a Zogby/Forbes poll that asked respondents what they would most like to be known for. Intelligence? Good looks? Sense of humor? Unexpectedly, fully

one half of all respondents said they would most like to be known for being authentic.

Pearcey concludes: "In a world of spin and hype, the postmodern generation is searching desperately for something real and authentic. They will not take Christians seriously unless our churches and parachurch organizations demonstrate an authentic way of life – unless they are communities that exhibit the character of God in their relationships and mode of living."[\[9\]](#)

For most of the chapter Pearcey highlights examples of both sides of this call, people and ministries who claim Christ but use the world's naturalistic methods, particularly in fundraising, marketing, and focusing on a personality rather than the message. She also points to people such as Richard Wurmbrand and Francis Schaeffer who lived out their Christian worldview without flashy results and hyped conferences and campaigns.

Most of us at Probe Ministries were heavily influenced by Francis Schaeffer, his ministry at L'Abri Switzerland, and his books. Many Christians whose youth spanned the turbulent '60s and '70s found Schaeffer a glowing beacon of truth and relevance in a world turned upside down by protests, drugs, war, crime, racism, and skepticism. Essentially, Schaeffer believed the gospel to be total truth. If that was the case, then living by a Christian worldview ought to be able to give real answers to real questions from real people.

We believe that what the postmodern world is searching for, what will most satisfy its craving for authenticity, is the person of Jesus Christ. They can only see Him in our lives and our answers to real questions. Our Web site at [Probe.org](http://Probe.org) is filled with the total truth of the Christian worldview. In our ["Answers to E-Mail" section](#) you can see authenticity lived out as we answer real questions and attacks with truth, respect, and gentleness.

We're certainly not perfect. We have much to learn and correct as we search out the answers to today's questions. We struggle with the funding and marketing of our ministry using methods that work but do not manipulate, coerce, or misrepresent who we are and what we do. Nancy Pearcey has challenged all of us in ministry, no less those of us at Probe Ministries, to always put Jesus first, people second, and ministry third.

## Notes

1. Phillip Johnson, in the Foreword to Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 11.
2. Pearcey, 19.
3. Christopher Reeve quoted by Pearcey, 22.
4. Pearcey, 97-98.
5. Ibid., 153-154.
6. Ibid., 157.
7. Ibid, 168.
8. Ibid., 280-281.
9. Ibid., 378.

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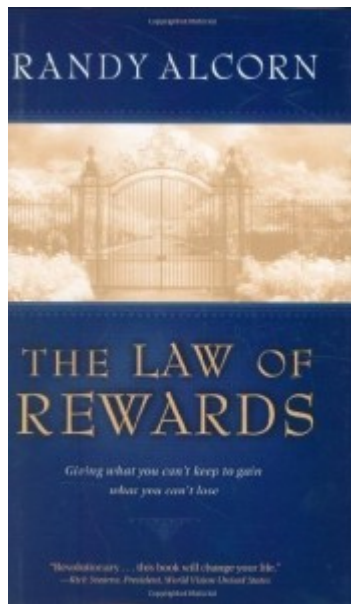
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# The Law of Rewards

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn explore the biblical doctrine of eternal rewards. The Bible promises believers heavenly rewards for earthly obedience.*

## Introducing the Law of Rewards

The hit movie *Gladiator* begins with a powerful scene. Just before engaging the German barbarians in battle, General Maximus addresses some of his Roman soldiers. “Brothers,” he says, “what we do in life echoes in eternity.” Although Maximus was a pagan, his statement is entirely consistent with biblical Christianity, particularly the Bible’s teaching on eternal rewards.



In *The Law of Rewards*, [{1}](#) Randy Alcorn writes: “While our faith determines our eternal destination, our behavior determines our eternal rewards” [{2}](#). The Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by God’s grace, through personal faith in Christ, apart from any works whatever (Eph. 2:8-9). But it also teaches, with equal clarity, that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that we may be recompensed for what we have done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). This judgment (which is

only for believers) is not to determine whether or not we are saved. Its purpose is to evaluate our works and determine whether we shall receive, or lose, eternal rewards (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Alcorn writes, “Our works are what we have done with our resources—time, energy, talents, money, possessions.” [{3}](#) The apostle Paul describes our works as a building project. At the judgment seat of Christ the quality of our work will be tested with fire. If we have used quality building materials (gold, silver, precious stones), then our work will endure and we will be rewarded by the Lord. If we have used poor building materials (in this case, wood, hay, or straw), then our work will be consumed and we will suffer the loss of rewards (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

This raises some important questions. What are we doing with

the resources that God has entrusted to us? Are we seeking to build God's kingdom, in God's way, empowered by God's Spirit? Or are we merely engaged in empire-building for our own glory? Are we investing our resources in reaching the world for Christ, making disciples, and helping the poor and needy? Or are we only concerned with satisfying our own immediate wants and desires?

It's here that the worldview dimensions of our subject can be most clearly seen. Most of us would probably find it difficult to use our resources in the service of God or our fellow man if we thought that this life was all there is and that death is the end of our personal existence. But Christianity says that there's more – a *lot* more. And if Christianity is true, then Maximus was right: "What we do in life echoes in eternity." Randy Alcorn has observed, "The missing ingredient in the lives of countless Christians today is *motivation*. . . . The doctrine of eternal rewards for our obedience is the neglected key to unlocking our motivation."[{4}](#)

## Questioning Our Motivation

Is the desire for eternal rewards a proper or legitimate motivation for serving Christ? Isn't it somewhat shallow, maybe even selfish, for our service to Christ to be motivated by a desire for heavenly rewards? Furthermore, shouldn't we serve Christ simply because of who He is, rather than for what we can get out of it? To some people, the promise of eternal rewards sounds like a crass appeal to our baser instincts. But is it?

Before we jump to any unwarranted conclusions and possibly overstate the case, we may first want to take a step back, take a deep breath, and remind ourselves of a few things. In the first place, as Randy Alcorn observes, "it wasn't *our* idea that God would reward us. It was *his* idea!"[{5}](#) If we search the pages of the New Testament, we repeatedly find promises of

heavenly rewards for earthly obedience. Indeed, Jesus himself urges our obedience in light of future rewards (Luke 6:35). Not only that, in Matthew 6:20 he *commands* us to store up for ourselves “treasures in heaven.” Now this leads to an interesting little twist. In John 14:21 Jesus says, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.” We *could* make the argument, then, that the one who does *not* seek to store up treasures in heaven is being disobedient to Christ’s command and demonstrating a lack of love for him!

In a somewhat similar vein, Alcorn wrote:

It is certainly true that desire for reward should not be our only motivation. But it is also true that it’s a fully legitimate motive encouraged by God. In fact, the two most basic things we can believe about God are first that he exists, and second that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him (Heb. 11:6). If you don’t believe God is a rewarder, you are rejecting a major biblical doctrine and have a false view of God.{6}

Of course, we must always remember that the Lord knows the motivations of our hearts – and these will be taken into account at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 4:5). In addition, Jesus solemnly warns us: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:1).

The biblical picture of rewards, then, would seem to go something like this. The Lord is absolutely worthy of our obedience and service, whether we ever personally profit from it or not (e.g. see Luke 17:10). Nevertheless, the Lord is a rewarder of those who seek Him and He commands us to seek His rewards as well! And when one really thinks about it, “Hearing our Master say, ‘Well done’ will not simply be for our pleasure but for *his*!”{7}



# The Life God Rewards

What kind of life does God reward? For what sort of works will believers be rewarded when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ? The simplest answer to this question, and the most general, is that we will be rewarded for everything we've done that was motivated by our love for the Lord and empowered by His Spirit. Indeed, Jesus said that we would even be rewarded for simply giving a cup of cold water to someone because he is a follower of Christ (Matt. 10:42).

But the Bible specifically mentions many other things for which we can also be rewarded. The New Testament describes as many as five different crowns which will be given to believers for various works of faithfulness, obedience, discipline, and love. For example, there is the *imperishable crown* (1 Cor. 9:25), which appears to be rewarded for "determination, discipline, and victory in the Christian life."[{8}](#) There is the *crown of righteousness* which, according to Paul, will be awarded by the Lord "to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). There is the *crown of life*, "given for faithfulness to Christ in persecution or martyrdom."[{9}](#) In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells the church in Smyrna, "the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10; see also James 1:12). Additionally, there is the *crown of rejoicing* (1 Thess. 2:19; Phil. 4:1), "given for pouring oneself into others in evangelism and discipleship."[{10}](#) And finally, there is the *crown of glory* (1 Pet. 5:4), "given for faithfully representing Christ in a position of leadership."[{11}](#)

Of course, as Alcorn observes, "There's nothing in this list that suggests it's exhaustive."[{12}](#) Indeed, as we've already seen, the Bible seems to say that we will be rewarded for every act of love and service which we did for the glory of

God. But there's another side to this discussion which we dare not overlook. The Bible not only indicates that we can gain rewards; it also warns us that we can lose them as well.

Paul compared the Christian life to an athletic competition in which our goal is to win the prize. This is why, he told the Corinthians, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:27). The Bible suggests that the works of some believers will be completely consumed at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:15). Tragically, these believers will enter heaven without any rewards from their Lord. To avoid this catastrophe, let us heed Paul's advice and "run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Cor. 9:24).

## Power, Pleasures, and Possessions

What should we think about power, pleasures, and possessions? Are they merely temptations that should be avoided, or genuine goods that can be legitimately sought and desired? Although some may find it surprising, each of these things *is* good—at least considered simply in itself. Each finds its ultimate source in God. And each existed *before* sin and evil corrupted His good creation. God has always been *powerful*. He clearly took *pleasure* in His work of creation, repeatedly describing it as "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). And as the Creator of all that exists (other than himself, of course), everything ultimately belongs to God (1 Cor. 10:26). Indeed, the Bible sometimes describes Him as the "*possessor* of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19). Clearly, then, there's nothing inherently wrong with power, pleasures, or possessions.

So why have these things gained such tainted reputations? Probably because they've so often been misused and abused by sinful men and women. Indeed, describing sin and evil as the misuse, abuse, perversion or corruption of some good gift of

God is part of a long and venerable tradition in the history of philosophy and theology. And one doesn't have to look very far to find plenty of examples of man's sinful misuse of power, pleasures, and possessions. Just turn on the evening news, or read the local paper, and you'll find many such examples. But we must always remember that it's the *misuse* of these things that is sinful and wrong; the things in themselves are good and desirable. And this is confirmed by the teaching of Scripture.

Consider the kind of rewards God offers us. For faithful and obedient service now, He promises power, pleasures, and possessions in eternity! Jesus made it clear that those who are faithful with the little things in this life, will be rewarded with great power and authority in the next (Luke 19:15-19). He taught that those who invest their time, talents, and treasures in building God's kingdom here and now are laying up great treasures in heaven for themselves in the hereafter (Matt. 6:19-21; 19:21). And pleasures? The psalmist wrote of God, "In Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever" (16:11).

Randy Alcorn has written, "God has created us each with desires for pleasure, possessions, and power."[{13}](#) We want these things "not because we are sinful but *because we are human.*"[{14}](#) Although our sinfulness can, and often does, lead us to misuse these things, we've seen that they're actually good gifts of God. "Power, possessions, and pleasures are legitimate objects of desire that our Creator has instilled in us *and* by which he can motivate us to obedience."[{15}](#) May we faithfully serve the Lord, trusting him as "the Rewarder of those who diligently seek him."[{16}](#)

## Investing in Eternity

A Christian worldview must be fleshed-out in the rough and tumble world of our daily lives if we're going to be salt and

light to the surrounding culture. Now, as always, true disciples must be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (Jas. 1:22).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

Many of us read these verses and only hear Jesus’ command not to store up treasures on earth. But if this is all we hear, then we’re missing the main point that Jesus is trying to make. As Alcorn observes, the central focus of this passage “is not the renunciation of earthly treasures but the accumulation of heavenly treasures. We’re to avoid storing up unnecessary treasures on earth not as an end in itself, but as a life strategy to lay up treasures in heaven.”[\[17\]](#) In a sense, Jesus is calling us to adopt a long-term investment strategy.

Think about the fate of all our earthly treasures. Isn’t Jesus right? Won’t they either wear out, break down, rust, become outdated, or get stolen? And even if none of this happens, we can’t hold on to earthly wealth forever, can we? “Either it leaves us while we live, or we leave it when we die.”[\[18\]](#) So is it really smart to pour all our time and energy into the accumulation of earthly treasures? Is this really a wise investment strategy?

We’ve been discussing issues raised by Randy Alcorn’s excellent book, *The Law of Rewards*. I can think of no better way to conclude than with this powerful and thought-provoking citation:

Gather your family and go visit a junkyard or a dump. Look

at all the piles of “treasures” that were formerly Christmas and birthday presents. Point out things that people worked long hours to buy and paid hundreds of dollars for, that children quarreled about, friendships were lost over, honesty was sacrificed for, and marriages broke up over. Look at the remnants of gadgets and furnishings that now lie useless after their brief life span. Remind yourself that most of what you own will one day end up in a junkyard like this. And even if it survives on earth for a while, you won’t. . . . When you examine the junkyard, ask yourself this question: ‘When all that I ever owned lies abandoned, broken, useless, and forgotten, what will I have done with my life that will last for eternity?’[\[19\]](#)

## Notes

1. Much of the material for this article comes from Randy Alcorn, *The Law of Rewards* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003). If you’re interested in exploring this topic further, you may also want to read Bruce Wilkinson (with David Kopp), *A Life God Rewards: Why Everything You Do Today Matters Forever* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2002).

2. Alcorn, 7.

3. Ibid., 6.

4. Ibid., 99-100.

5. Ibid., 105.

6. Ibid., 116.

7. Ibid., 92.

8. Ibid., 91.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 92.

13. Ibid., 111.

14. Ibid., 112.

15. Ibid., 113.

16. Ibid., 121.

17. Ibid., 22.

18. Ibid., 23.

19. Ibid., 23.

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# Making Moral Choices – From A Biblical Worldview Perspective

*Kerby Anderson addresses making moral choices using the Bible and biblical principles, using both philosophical and practical approaches.*

## Love and Biblical Morality

✖ A Christian view of morality is based upon the assumption that God exists and has revealed Himself to the human race. He has chosen to reveal Himself in nature (Psalm 19, Romans 1) and in human conscience (Romans 2:14-15). He has also revealed Himself through the Bible (Psalm 119, 2 Timothy 3:16) and in the person of Jesus Christ (John 10:30, Hebrews 1:1-4).

God's character is the ultimate standard of right and wrong. And even though the Bible was written long before the development of genetic engineering or modern media, it nevertheless provides principles that can be used to evaluate the morality of social, scientific, and technological issues.

Biblical morality can be developed from learning to live God's way according to biblical principles. Though the Christian life is much more than a set of rules or principles, these

principles do provide moral boundaries for behavior.

Biblical morality is also based upon love that has its source in God. Jesus was asked by the teachers of the law which was the most important commandment. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

The two most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. Essentially all biblical principles rest upon this foundation. And these principles can be found in God's revelation in the Bible. God's character as expressed in God's Word should be diligently applied to every area of life.

Jesus also taught Christians to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44-45): "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." As his opening phrase suggests, this was not the common practice of the day. In fact, it was completely contrary to the concept of love practiced in that day or even in our day.

The apostle Paul teaches that love is "the law of Christ" and thereby supreme and sufficient (Galatians 5:14; 6:2). He also teaches that love is the foundation of Christian obedience. Even if we manifest the gifts of the Spirit and do good works, they do not profit us unless they are done in love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

He also teaches that God shows His love to us in that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8) and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 6:37-39). And this is not just a theological truth, but the "love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14) and provides us with an ability to live the

Christian life.

## Knowing God's Will

How do we make proper moral choices based upon biblical principles? The Bible does provide biblical guidelines on a vast array of issues. Christians also have the liberty to make individual moral choices in areas of moral neutrality. Ultimately, making moral choices involves discerning the will of God in one's life.

Whole books have been written on how we can know the will of God, but we can summarize a few key principles here.

First, we can know God's will through the Bible. Before considering any other way to discern God's will, one should ask whether the Bible has already provided guidance in this area. The Bible is full of God's specific commands and principles.

A teenager doesn't have to ask if he should get drunk; the Bible has already addressed that issue (Ephesians 5:18). An unmarried couple doesn't need to ask if they should live together before they marry. Again, the Bible has addressed the topic (1 Corinthians 6:18).

The Bible provides boundaries and barriers to our moral actions. We are to stay within those moral boundaries. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:6), told them "Do not go beyond what is written."

A second way we discern God's will is through prayer. We are commanded to bring our requests before God. In Philippians 4:6 we are told: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

If we are earnestly reading the Bible and seeking God's will,



He will reveal it to us, often through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We read in Romans 8:27 that “The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”

A third way we discern God’s will is through our conscience. If our conscience is troubling us about a particular action or behavior, then we should refrain from that activity. Paul says that each person “must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). He adds that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

The opposite is not necessarily true. In other words, conscience is a good stop sign but not a green light. A troubled conscience is sufficient justification to refrain, and a guilty conscience is reason enough to stop a particular action or behavior.

A clear conscience is no justification for proceeding. The Bible teaches that, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). We can easily deceive ourselves into sin.

Christians should strive to have a good conscience before God and man (Acts 24:16). A troubled conscience is reason to avoid an action, but a clear conscience may not be sufficient justification to proceed.

## **Christian Liberty**

What about times when the Bible does not clearly seem to speak to a particular action? These areas of moral neutrality are still governed by biblical principles that guide our Christian liberty.

Even though a particular action may not be prohibited in Scripture, it still may be offensive to others because of their social, ethnic, or religious background. Another person’s family background or spiritual maturity is also a

consideration Christians must make.

The Apostle Paul articulates the principles guiding our liberty in Romans 14-15. The specific example that he uses involves the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. While this issue is of no moral concern today, it does provide key biblical principles which we can apply in determining our response to issues not specifically addressed in the Bible.

The first principle is that Christians are not to have a judgmental attitude toward one another in regard to issues that are morally neutral. Paul says in Romans 14:3 that the "one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat" nor should the "one who does not eat . . . judge the one who eats." In other words, whether you participate in or refrain from a morally neutral activity, you should not be judgmental of the other person.

No one has the right to force their moral conclusions on others when the Bible does not provide clear principles on the matter. Paul asks in Romans 14:4, "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" Christians are instructed to decide these matters for themselves as they consult the Bible and their conscience.

Second, each Christian must decide what is right or wrong for him or her. Paul teaches that if you believe a particular action to be wrong for you, then it is wrong. He says in Romans 14:4, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

He taught that all things were clean. In other words, there was no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols (it was morally neutral). But he also teaches that if a person believes it is sinful to indulge in a practice, then it is indeed sinful for them.

Each person "must be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans

14:5). If there is doubt, then it is better to refrain from participating rather than engaging in what has become a sinful action for the person. Doubt or uncertainty is a sufficient reason to refrain from a particular activity or behavior.

A key test of Christian obedience is whether a person can do so “for the Lord” (Romans 14:6). Christians are to “live for the Lord” because “we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). If one cannot participate in an activity while serving the Lord, then he or she should refrain. Paul says that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

A third principle is whether a morally neutral activity would be “an obstacle or a stumbling block” to another believer (Romans 14:13). Christians should be aware of their actions on the Christian walk of others around them. While we may have liberty in Christ to participate in an action or behavior, another believer might be offended or adversely affected by what we do.

Paul teaches that we have a moral responsibility to other believers. He says, “we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength” (Romans 15:1). In order to do so we may have to limit our Christian liberty.

At the same time there is a balance between enjoying our liberty in Christ and trying not to give offense. If one believes he or she can participate in an activity, then one should do so with that firm “conviction before God” (Romans 14:22). But it would be wise not to participate publicly but privately for the sake of a believer who might be hurt by one’s actions (Romans 14:15).

A final principle is how a particular action or behavior will affect the individual believer’s walk with the Lord. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 that; “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”

Although these morally neutral practices are lawful, they may not be profitable and could actually master (or enslave) a person. There is nothing in the Bible about such things as poor nutrition, addiction to caffeine, or watching lots of television, yet most would agree that such behaviors are not profitable. In fact, they are frequently debilitating to the individual. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that whether “you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

## **Honesty and Biblical Morality**

Although the Bible admonishes us to be honest and to tell the truth, honesty seems to be at an all-time low. One study of high school students found that 71 percent of them admitted to cheating on an exam at least once in the last twelve months. And 92 percent of them said they lied to their parents in the last twelve months while 79 percent said they did so two or more times. So what does the Bible say about honesty and truth?

The Old Testament calls upon the people of God to deal honestly with one another. Leviticus 9:35 says “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity.” Likewise, Proverbs 11:1 warns that “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord.” Believers are to use honest weights and be honest in their dealings with others.

A righteous person does not “take a bribe against the innocent” (Psalm 15:5). Isaiah (5:23) pronounces judgment on those “who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right.”

The New Testament admonishes Christians to “have a good conscience” and desire to conduct themselves “honorably in all things” (Hebrews. 13:18). Paul said he attempted to always maintain “a blameless conscience *both* before God and before

men” (Acts 24:16). Christians should “have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Honesty also requires telling the truth. The Ten Commandments forbids both the swearing of false oaths and the bearing of false testimony (Exodus 20:7, 16; Deuteronomy 5:11, 20; cf. Leviticus 19:12; Jeremiah 7:9). In the Old Testament, false witnesses were to suffer the same punishment that they had hoped to inflict upon the others (Deuteronomy 19:16-21).

Telling the truth also involved more than false testimony in a court. Believers are not to spread false reports (Proverbs 12:17; 14:5, 25) or report the truth maliciously or engage in slander (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 26:20).

Speaking evil is prohibited (Psalm 34:13; Proverbs 24:28; Ephesians 4:31; James 4:11; 1 Peter 3:10), and it disqualifies a person from God’s favor (Psalm 15:3) and from a leadership position in the church (1 Timothy 3:8; Titus 2:3).

In the Old Testament, oaths and vows were used many times. Abraham (Genesis 21:22-34), Jacob (Genesis 25:33; 28:20), Joseph (Genesis 50:5), Joshua (Joshua 6:26), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11), Saul (1 Samuel 14:24), David (1 Samuel 20:17), Ezra (Ezra 10:5), and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:25) all swore oaths or vows. The swearing of these oaths and vows underscores the seriousness of telling the truth and following up on one’s commitment.

We need truth telling today like never before. Perhaps the greatest battle in society today is a battle over truth. Voters are skeptical of politicians. Proponents of various biomedical procedures (abortion, cloning) often redefine terms and mislead the public about the true nature of the procedures they advocate. We need Christians to set an example by being honest and telling the truth.

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# Restoring the Sacred

## The Loss of the Sacred

There are several ways to define modernism. One way is this: modernism was an attempt to remove the sacred from society and to replace it with a mechanistic naturalism. Everything was to be understood and explained in scientific terms.

The late philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade wrote this:

The completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos [that is, the cosmos with the sacred removed] is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit . . . desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies.[\[1\]](#)

*Profane*, here, is another word for *secular*. It is contrasted with *sacred*. My *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sacred* as “connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.” It is closely related to *sanctified* which means “holy” which means “dedicated or consecrated to God.”[\[2\]](#)

Ours is obviously a secular society. Everything open for public discussion is to be explained with no reference to the sacred; there is no acknowledged connection to God. It seems the only time the sacred makes it into the news is when there is a tragedy and reporters talk about people praying, or when a famous religious person, such as the Pope, dies.

Once upon a time in the West, our society operated as though God mattered. Now, such views are considered quaint relics of the past which shouldn't be allowed to invade the public

square. The late Christopher Reeve in a speech about stem cell research at Yale University said that “our government should not be influenced by any religion when matters of public policy are being debated.”[\[3\]](#) Religion is to be a private affair only.

The late theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin, after spending four decades in India, said this about the West:

The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture, and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people.[\[4\]](#)

Why should this matter to us? Among other reasons is the simple unfairness in a democracy of “religious people” not being able to bring *their* worldviews into public debates while the nonreligious can. I can think of two explanations for this idea. First, it’s thought that religion necessarily creates unreasonable *bias* whereas irreligion doesn’t. Religious belief removes our ability to be objective, it is thought. People who think this way need to catch up with current philosophy! There are no value-free facts, and no perspectives that do not begin with unprovable assumptions.[\[5\]](#)

Second, it’s thought that religious biases are likely to be *destructive* because of their “intolerant” character. This is a popular mantra today; it is trotted out with all the authority of unassailable fact. Didn’t the events of 9/11 prove it? Responding to the observation that people see those horrible events as illustrating what religious monotheism causes, writer Os Guinness noted that “In the last century, more people were killed by secularist intellectuals, in the name of secularist ideologies, than in all the religious persecutions and repressions in Western history combined.”[\[6\]](#) If the twentieth century is a good witness, there is greater danger from secular powers than from religious ones.

Beyond that, though, is a problem Christians have individually and corporately. When so much of our time is spent in a realm in which our Christian beliefs aren't welcomed, we begin to forget their importance for all of life. So we start thinking from a secular perspective. In addition, we even find it easier to let our Christian beliefs be shaped by non-Christian thinking.

In her latest book, *Total Truth*,[\[7\]](#) Nancy Pearcey has reminded us of the importance of destroying the divide between the sacred and the secular in our thinking. But it can't stop with our thinking; the sacred needs to be an integral part of our lives. As part of that process it would be good to be reminded of just what we mean by the sacred.

## Sacredness

As noted earlier, *sacred* means to be dedicated or devoted to God. It involves a separation of purpose: something is separated from the use of the world for the use of God.

The idea of sacredness is reflected in a number of ways in the various religions of the world. There are holy books and places and festivals. The sacred is reflected in religious architecture. Islamic mosques, for example, are designed to point people to Allah. Muslim writer Hwa Irfan speaks of "sacred geometry [which] is the science of creating a space, writing or other artwork, which reminds one of the greatness of Allah."[\[8\]](#) In the past, Christianity too, of course, was conscious of the sacred in its architecture. Medieval era churches were built for the purpose of "signifying the sacred," of reflecting something about God. The furnishings of churches were designed to aid in this focus.

## Old Testament

What does the Bible tell us about sacredness or holiness?[\[9\]](#) In the Old Testament it refers primarily to God. "Holy, holy,



holy is the Lord of hosts” Isaiah said (6:3). In Old Testament times, God showed Himself to be set apart from His created order through such events as Moses being told to remove his shoes before the burning bush because he was standing on holy ground (Ex. 3:5). Later, at Sinai, God called Moses up onto a mountain to teach him His laws, far away from the people signifying His separateness from a fallen world (Ex. 19). His separation from unclean things was reflected also through His laws (e.g., Lev. 11:43, 44). Anyone who would approach God, who would “ascend His holy hill,” according to the Psalmist, must have “clean hands and a pure heart” (24:4).

The word *holy* was applied to other things that were separated by God, such as the nation of Israel (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 20:26), the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23), the tabernacle with both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (Ex. 26:33), and the various feasts and special observations, such as the Day of Atonement (Ex. 30:10). This even extended to objects used for worship. For example, there was special incense that was too holy to be used by people for themselves (Ex. 30:37). In the Old Testament, then, we find God using things and events to teach His people about His holy nature.

## **New Testament**

What do we find in the New Testament? Again, the primary reference is to God. All three members of the Trinity are said to be holy. Peter repeated God’s admonition recorded in Lev. 11:44—“Be holy because I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). He called Jesus “the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:69). And, of course, the Spirit is called the Holy Spirit (e.g., Lk. 2:26).

Whereas in the Old Testament, God’s separateness from creation and the unclean was the emphasis, in the New Testament the moral dimension comes to the fore (although the moral wasn’t absent from the Old Testament). In the Old Testament the concern is more with external matters; in the New Testament the focus is on the internal. The writer of Hebrews says we

were “made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10). This doesn’t mean we’ve fully “arrived” in our personal sanctification. Paul says we’re to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). The shift in emphasis between Testaments doesn’t indicate a change in the meaning of holiness or its importance. For example, God’s people are called saints—holy ones or sanctified ones—in both Testaments (e.g., Ps. 34:9; Acts 9:13). However, in the Old Testament times, God used external matters, which could be seen, to teach about the inward change He desired.

Does this mean that we no longer think about events and physical things as holy as in the Old Testament? Certainly not in the same way Old Testament saints did. We no longer have the Temple and the sacrificial system and the Aaronic priesthood. All things are God’s, and all things are to be offered up to Him with a pure heart. There should be no sacred/secular split in the sense that some things are under God’s jurisdiction and some aren’t. However, we might find that, just like the Israelites, certain items or observances might help in directing us to God or reminding us of His character.

## **Secularism—The Loss of the Sacred**

Contrasted with *sacred* is the idea of *secular*. The root of the word “secular” is interesting. It comes from a Latin word that means “time.” James Hitchcock says “to call someone secular means that he is completely time-bound, totally a child of his age, a creature of history, with no vision of eternity. Unable to see anything in the perspective of eternity, he cannot believe that God exists or acts in human affairs.”[\[10\]](#) A secular society, then, is one which is tied to time, to the temporal, with no reference to the eternal, to God.

We shouldn't think that there was no distinction between the sacred and the secular in the West until modern times. In the Medieval era, there was secular music and poetry. However, there was an increasing turn to the secular following the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century writers such as Voltaire were openly espousing secularism. If religion was the cause of such terrible things as the wars of the sixteenth century, it should be removed from the public square.

Over time, secularism gradually encroached on almost all areas of human life. In the university in the nineteenth century, a movement began to remove religion from its central place in education and segregate it to its own department. In the workplace, *efficiency* became a watchword; because religion could disrupt the workplace, it was to be left at home. By the twentieth century buildings and art and law and . . . well, you name it; all areas of human life were now to be thought of in secular terms and developed according to the methods of science. Life would be much improved, it was thought, if we were freed from the narrowness of religion to make of ourselves what we would. Humanism was the fundamental worldview, and secular humanism at that. The name given to this era was "modernism."

What has this gotten us as a society? We're free to construct our reality any way we wish now that God is supposedly dead. But what have we done with our freedom? Henry Grunwald, former ambassador to Austria and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc. said this:

Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed—the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The

great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing.[{11}](#)

## What the Loss of the Sacred Means for Us

### Life in a secular world

What does it mean to live in a secular society? How does it color our Christian experience? How does it affect the way we make decisions? The way we spend our money and time? The way we relate to people?

In 1998, Craig Gay published a book titled *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As if God Doesn't Exist*.[{12}](#) In the introduction, he addresses the question why there needs to be another book on modernism. He gives a couple of reasons. First, he says, is the possibility of unfruitfulness. He points to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew as a biblical example. Could any ineffectiveness on our part or the part of our churches be traced back to accommodation to the secular mind? Could our many church programs and strategies be found wanting because we are using modern methods which run counter to the ways of God? Our private lives have become divided: Monday through Friday are for money-making endeavors; Saturday is for working around the house or going to the lake; Sunday is for religion. We live bifurcated lives.

Second is “the threat of apostasy and spiritual death.” Think of the proverbial frog in the pot of water slowly coming to a boil, and then think about how easy it is to adopt the notion that “you only go around once” and the modernistic solution of getting all the “toys” we can *while* we can . . . and gradually not only *look* like the world but become card-carrying members of it.

## **The sacred brought down to the secular**

The late Francis Schaeffer taught many of us the meaning and significance of “secular humanism,” and, as a result of such teaching, evangelicals have taken on the project of integrating the sacred and the secular in more and more areas of their lives. Much of this has been good. Determining to let one’s Christian beliefs inform all aspects of life is hard in itself; in a secular culture that doesn’t care for such things, it’s a major challenge. As noted earlier, it is an uphill battle living as a Christian in our secular society, so one should be cautious about criticizing the sincere efforts of fellow believers.

In my opinion, however, some or many of us have unconsciously pulled a “switcheroo.” In our efforts to tear down the divide between sacred and secular, we have been guilty to a significant extent of bringing the sacred down to the secular rather than lifting all of life up to the secular, as it were. We live so much of our lives in the “lower story” as Nancy Pearcey calls it (following Schaeffer) that we have simply baptized as Christian attitudes and ways of life that are questionable. We’ve secularized the sacred rather than vice versa.

Ask yourself this: Besides things internal to you—attitudes, beliefs, etc.—what externals in your life clearly reflect the divine? How does the sacred color your life? What habits of life, objects or tools, what signifiers of the sacred, are part of your life?

## **Restoring the Sacred, *Not* the Sacred-Secular Split**

In so far as this describes us, we need to make the conscious decision to bring about change. The first order of business is to re-acknowledge the sacredness of God. Then we must

recognize that we are sanctified, set apart. We are to be drawn up to God, and one significant area in which this should be seen is in worship. Think of worship as the sanctified being drawn up to the Sanctifier. In another place I wrote this:

*The object of one's worship reflects back on the worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.*[\*{13}\*](#)

Two thoughts to add which might seem contradictory at first. In response to the secularization of our society, it is our responsibility to bring God back into all the affairs of our lives, even the mundane. In our *private* lives that will be easier to do than in our *public* lives simply because we don't set all the rules for the latter. For example, a person working for a financial institution probably won't be able to insist that the boss leads the office in prayer before work each morning. However, there *are* ways we can bring a Christian view of the world and godly morality into the workplace. We want God to be over the full sweep of our lives such that we don't have a brick wall dividing our lives in two.

Along with that, however, we might find it helpful to bring into our lives some kinds of signifiers of the sacred, some kinds of objects or places or routines or *something* that will provide reminders to us that the world we see isn't all there is. Christians have used symbols for ages to remind them of the "otherness" of God. Art has made a big comeback in recent decades as a means of portraying truths about God and a Christian view of life and the world. Such things aren't prescribed in Scripture. What *is* prescribed, of course, is the rejection of idolatry. Therefore, anything we use as an aid

must remain just that—an aid, not the object of our faith.

Thomas Molnar argues that a strong Christian belief in the supernatural needs worship symbols such as prayer, ritual, a sense of the sacred community, sincere piety, and the élan (enthusiastic energy) of the clergy.”[\[14\]](#) He believes that the only way the church can remain strong in a pagan environment is to “remain unquestionably loyal” to both the intellectual component—doctrine—and the sacred component which employs symbolic forms.[\[15\]](#) The intellectual component gives us an understanding of our faith and our world. By being renewed, it enables us to “test and approve what God’s will is” (Rom. 12:2). The symbolic component can help us focus on and learn about God. Things like visual aids, postures, particular times set aside for a focus on God, along with Bible reading and prayer, can be very beneficial, as long as they don’t lead to idolatry or a diminished or altered view of God.

We don’t have the law with all its stipulations about the Temple and its furnishings, sacrifices, and special feasts. In my opinion, however, to simply set all such things aside *because* they aren’t required by law is short-sighted. Human nature hasn’t changed; if sacred signifiers were helpful to the Israelites, maybe they would be to us, too.

To give people a list of things to do that goes beyond clear scriptural exhortation to such practices as prayer, learning God’s Word, gathering together as a body, and participating in the sacraments or ordinances would be to overstep our boundaries. The most I can do, then, is ask you think about it. Consider how you can restore a clear sense of the sacred in your life. Not just any sacredness *per se*, of course, but a sense of the presence of the One who is truly sacred and of the significance of the sacred for how you live.

## Notes

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2. *The Pop-up New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Selectsoft Publishing, 1992.

3. Christopher Reeve, "Stem Cells and Public Policy" Yale University, April 3, 2003. Accessed from [www.yale.edu/opa/v31.n25/story7.html](http://www.yale.edu/opa/v31.n25/story7.html) on 4/6/2005. The offending statement was reported in Mitch Horowitz, "Ambassador of the Miraculous" on Horowitz' Web site at [www.mitchhorowitz.com/christopher-reeve.html](http://www.mitchhorowitz.com/christopher-reeve.html) (Accessed 4/6/2005).

4. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 31.

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[www.islamonline.net/English/Science/2002/07/article02.shtml](http://www.islamonline.net/English/Science/2002/07/article02.shtml), accessed 4/7/2005.

9. I am indebted for much of what follows to Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids:



Baker, 1996), s.v., "Holiness."

10. James Hitchcock, *What Is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism Became Secular, and How It Is Changing Our World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 10-11. I highly recommend this book for a history of secular humanism through the 1970s.

11. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75, quoted in Garber, 54.

12. Craig Gay, *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As if God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

13. Rick Wade, "Christianity: The True Humanism" Probe Ministries, 2000. Available on the Web at [www.probe.org/christianity-the-true-humanism/](http://www.probe.org/christianity-the-true-humanism/).

14. Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 79.

15. Molnar, 81.

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## What's the Meaning of Life?

*Former Probe staffer Jerry Solomon explains how Christianity answers the biggest question of them all: What is the meaning of life?*

Cathy has been married to her husband Dan for twenty years and is the mother of two teenagers. She is very involved in family, church, and community activities. Many consider her to be the model of one that "has it together," so to speak. Unknown to her family and her many friends, lately she has

been thinking a lot about her lifestyle. As a result, she has even questioned whether there is any ultimate meaning or purpose underlying her busyness. At lunch one day she finds herself in an intimate conversation with a good friend named Sarah. Even though they have never talked about such things, Cathy decides to see how Sarah will respond to her questioning. Lets eavesdrop on their conversation.

*Cathy:* Sarah, I've been doing some serious thinking lately.

*Sarah:* Is something wrong?

*Cathy:* I don't know that I would say something is wrong. I just don't know what to make of these thoughts I've been having.

*Sarah:* What thoughts?

*Cathy:* This may sound like I'm going off the deep end or something, but I promise you I'm not. I've just started asking some really heavy questions. And I haven't told another soul about it.

*Sarah:* Well, tell me! You know you can trust me.

*Cathy:* Okay. But you promise not to laugh or blow it off?

*Sarah:* Stop being so defensive. Just say it!

*Cathy:* Sarah, why are you here? I mean, what is your purpose in life?

*Sarah:* (She pauses before responding flippantly.) You're right, you *have* gone off the deep end.

*Cathy:* Sarah, I need you to be serious with me here!

*Sarah:* Okay! I'm sorry! I'm just drawing a blank. Actually, I try *not* to think about that question.

*Cathy:* Yeah, well, denying it doesn't work anymore. It just

keeps rolling around in my head.

*Sarah:* Cant you talk to Dan about it?

*Cathy:* I've thought about it, but I don't want him to think there's something wrong between *us*.

*Sarah:* Well, what about talking to your pastor? I bet he'd have some answers.

*Cathy:* Yeah, I've thought about that too. Maybe I will.

Is Cathy really "weird," or is she an example of people that rub shoulders with us each day? And what about Sarah? Was her nervous response typical of how most of us would respond if we were asked questions about meaning and purpose?

James Dobson relates an intriguing story about a remarkable seventeen-year-old girl who achieved a perfect score on both sections of the "Scholastic Achievement Test, and a perfect on the tough University of California acceptance index. Never in history has anyone accomplished this intellectual feat, which is almost staggering to contemplate."[\[1\]](#) Interestingly, though, when a reporter "asked her, What is the meaning of life? she replied, I have no idea. I would like to know myself."[\[2\]](#)

This intellectually brilliant young lady has something in common with Cathy and Sarah, doesn't she? She is able to understand complicated subject matter, but she has no idea if life has any meaning.

Our goal in this essay is to see if there is an answer for them, as well as all of us.

## **The Questions Around Us**

As I was driving to my office one day I heard a dramatic radio advertisement for a book. It began something like this: "Would you like to find meaning in life?" As I listened to the

remainder of the ad I realized that the books author was focusing on New Age concepts of purpose and meaning. But the striking thing about what was said was that the advertisers obviously believed that they could get the attention of the radio audience by asking about meaning in life. Some may think it is advertising suicide to open an ad with such a question. Or perhaps the author and her publicists are on to something that “strikes a chord” with many people in our culture.

Questions of meaning and purpose are a part of the mental landscape as we enter a new millennium. Some contend this has not always been the case, but that such questions are an unprecedented legacy of the upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[\[3\]](#) Others assert that such questions are a result of mans rejection of God.[\[4\]](#)

Even though most of us don’t make such issues a part of our normal conversations, the questions tend to lurk around us. They can be heard in songs, movies, books, magazines, and many other media that permeate our lives. For example, Jackson Browne, an exceptionally reflective songwriter of the 60s and 70s, wrote these haunting lyrics in a song entitled *For a Dancer*:

Into a dancer you have grown  
From a seed somebody else has thrown  
Go ahead and throw  
Some seeds of your own  
And somewhere between the time you arrive  
And the time you go  
May lie a reason you were alive....[\[5\]](#)

Russell Banks, the author of *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, both of which became Oscar-nominated films, has this to say about his work: “I’m not a morbid man. In my writing, I’m just trying to describe the world as straightforwardly as I can. I think most lives are desperate and painful, despite surface appearances. If you consider

anyone's life for long, you find its without meaning." {6}

Woody Allen, the film writer, director, and actor, has consistently populated his scripts with characters who exchange dialogue concerning meaning and purpose. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* a character named Mickey says, "Do you realize what a thread were all hanging by? Can you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything. I gotta get some answers." {7}

Even television ads have focused on meaning, although in a flippant manner. A few years ago you could watch Michael Jordan running across hills and valleys in order to find a guru. When Jordan finds him he asks, "What is the meaning of life?" The guru answers with a maxim that leads to the product that is the real focus of Jordan's quest.

Even though such illustrations can be ridiculous, maybe they serve to lead us beyond the surface of our subject. We often get nervous when we are encouraged to delve into subject matter that might stretch us. When we get involved in conversations that go beyond the more mundane things of everyday life we may tend to get tense and defensive. Actually, this can be a good thing. The Christian shouldn't fear such conversations. Indeed, I'm confident that if we go beyond the surface, we can find peace and hope.

## Beyond the Surface

Listen to the sober words of a famous writer of the twentieth century:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.... I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason

for living (what is called a reason for living is an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.{8}

These phrases indicate that Albert Camus, author of *The Plague*, *The Stranger*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was not afraid to go beyond the surface. Camus was bold in exposing the thoughts many were having during his lifetime. In fact, his world view made it obligatory. He was struggling with questions of meaning in light of what some called the “death of God.” That is, if there is no God, can we find meaning? Many have concluded that the answer is a resounding “No!” If true, this means that one who believes there is no God is not living consistently with that belief.

William Lane Craig, one of the great Christian thinkers of our time, states that:

Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.{9}

Francis Schaeffer agrees with ‘ analysis, but makes even bolder assertions. He also maintains that the Christian can close the hopeless gap that is created in a persons godless worldview. Listen to what he wrote:

It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice. Thus, when you face twentieth-century man, whether he is brilliant or an ordinary man of the street, a man of the university or the docks, you are facing a man in tension; and it is this tension which works on your behalf as you speak to him.{10}

What happens when we go “beyond the surface” in order to find

meaning? Can a Christian worldview stand up to the challenge? I believe it can, but we must stop and think of whether we are willing to accept the challenge. David Henderson, a pastor and writer, gives us reason to pause and consider our response. He writes:

Our lives, like our Daytimers, are busy, busy, busy, full of things to do and places to go and people to see. Many of us, convinced that the opposite of an empty life is a full schedule, remain content to press on and ignore the deeper questions. Perhaps it is out of fear that we stuff our lives to the walls—fear that, were we to stop and ask the big questions, we would discover there are no satisfying answers after all.[{11}](#)

Let's jettison any fear and continue our investigation. There are satisfying answers. It is not necessary to "stuff our lives to the walls" in order to escape questions of meaning and purpose. God has spoken to us. Let us begin to pursue His answers.

## **Eternity in Our Hearts**

The book of Ecclesiastes contains numerous phrases that have entered our discourse. One of those phrases states that God "has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart. . ." (3:11). What a fascinating statement! Actually, the first part of the verse can be just as accurately translated "beautiful in its time." Thus "a harmony of purpose and a beneficial supremacy of control pervade all issues of life to such an extent that they rightly challenge our admiration."[{12}](#) The second part of the verse indicates that "man has a deep-seated sense of eternity, of purposes and destinies."[{13}](#) But man can't fathom the vastness of eternal things, even when he believes in the God of eternity. As a result, all people live with what some call a "God-shaped hole." Stephen Evans believes this hole can be understood through "the desire for eternal life, the desire

for eternal meaning, and the desire for eternal love:"{14}

The desire for *eternal life* is the most evident manifestation of the need for God. Deep in our hearts we feel death should not be, was not meant to be. The second dimension of our craving for eternity is the desire for *eternal meaning*. We want lives that are eternally meaningful. We crave eternity, and earthly loves resemble eternity enough to kindle our deepest love. Yet earthly loves are not eternal. Our sense that love is the clue to what its all about is right on target, but earthly love itself merely points us in the right direction. What we want is an *eternal love*, a love that loves us unconditionally, accepts us as we are, while helping us to become all we can become. In short, we want *God*, the God of Christian faith.{15}

We must trust God for what we cannot see and understand. Or, to put it another way, we continue to live knowing there is meaning, but we struggle to know exactly what it is at all times. We are striving for what the Bible refers to as our future glorification (Rom. 8:30). "There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied."{16} For example, we attempt to find meaning while searching for what is beautiful. C.S. Lewis referred to this in a sermon entitled *The Weight of Glory*:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.{17}



Lewis's remarkable prose reminds us that meaning must be *given* to us. "Meaning is never intrinsic; it is always derivative. If my life itself is to have meaning (or a meaning), it thus must derive its meaning from some sort of purposive, intentional activity. It must be endowed with meaning."[{18}](#) Thus we return to God, the giver of meaning.

## Meaning: Gods Gift

Think of all the wonderful gifts that God has given you. No doubt you can come up with a lengthy record of God's goodness. Does your list include meaning or purpose in life? Most people wouldn't think of meaning as part of Gods goodness to us. But perhaps we should. This is because "only a being like God—a creator of all who could eventually, in the words of the New Testament, work all things together for good—only this sort of being could guarantee a completeness and permanency of meaning for human lives."[{19}](#) So how did God accomplish this? The answer rests in His amazing love for us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Consider the profound words of Carl F.H. Henry: "the eternal and self-revealed Logos, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is the foundation of all meaning."[{20}](#) Bruce Lockerbie puts it like this: "The divine nature manifesting itself in the physical form of Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the integrating principle to which all life adheres, the focal point from which all being takes its meaning, the source of all coherence in the universe. Around him and him alone all else may be said to radiate. He is the Cosmic Center."[{21}](#)

Picture a bicycle. When you ride one you are putting your weight on a multitude of spokes that radiate from a hub. All the spokes meet at the center and rotate around it. The bicycle moves based upon the center. Thus it is with Christ. He is the center around whom we move and find meaning. Our focus is on Him.

When the apostle Paul reflected on meaning and purpose in his life in Philippians 3, he came to this conclusion (emphases added):

7...whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value *of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order *that I may gain Christ*, 9 *and may be found in Him*, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 *that I may know Him*, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order *that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*.

Did you notice how Christ was central to what Paul had to say about both his past and present? And did you notice that he used phrases such as “knowing Christ,” or “that I may gain Christ?” Such statements appear to be crucial to Paul’s sense of meaning and purpose. Paul wants “to know” Christ intimately, which means he wants to know by experience. “Paul wants to come to know the Lord Jesus in that fulness of experimental knowledge which is only wrought by being like Him.”[\[22\]](#)

Personally, Paul’s thoughts are important words of encouragement in my life. God through Christ gives meaning and purpose to me. And until I am glorified, I will strive to know Him and be like Him. Praise God for Jesus Christ, His gift of meaning!

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## Worldview and Truth

Each day Christians are confronted with a bewildering array of choices in ethics, actions, and lifestyles. The only way to make sense of this data is to have a consistent worldview. And Christians should be operating from a biblical worldview. As we will see, that is often not the case.

The Barna Research Group conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only 4 percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that 9 percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.[\[1\]](#)

Everyone has a worldview, but relatively few people (even religious people) have a biblical worldview. This explains a great deal about behavior. One reason so few people act like Christians is because they don't think like Christians. Behavior results from our values and beliefs. Thinking biblically about the issues of life should ultimately result in living biblically in society. Conversely, not thinking biblically should result in not living biblically within society.

Nancy Pearcey, in her latest book *Total Truth: Liberating*

*Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, tells the story of Sarah, a practicing Christian who worked for years as a counselor for Planned Parenthood. She did not try to talk women out of an abortion, but merely was content to make sure they knew what they were doing. She said that after she graduated from college, "My Christianity was reduced to a thin veneer over the core of a secular worldview. It was almost like having a split personality."[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, there are millions of Sarahs in the world who willingly live with a split personality. The split is between the sacred and the secular. Or the split is between fact and value. In their personal lives they try to live as Christians, but in their public world they think and act just like the non-Christians around them. They do not have a Christian worldview even though they are Christians.

Now you might wonder where the pastors are in all of this. After all, shouldn't pastors and church leadership be calling people to think and behave according to Christian principles? It turns out that part of the problem is the lack of sound biblical teaching about a biblical worldview.

The Barna Research Group found in a nationwide survey of senior pastors that only half of the country's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview. The gap among churches is reflected in the outcomes from the nation's two largest denominations. Southern Baptists had the highest percentage of pastors with a biblical worldview (71 percent), while the Methodists were lowest (27 percent).[\[3\]](#)

Obviously we need to do a better job within the church thinking about the array of issues that confront us from a biblical perspective. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that we have not been doing this effectively.

# Absolute Truth

One of the foundational aspects of a Christian worldview is the matter of absolute truth. The Bible rests upon belief in it. Yet surveys by George Barna show that a minority of born again adults (44 percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (9 percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.[{4}](#)

Even more disturbing is the growing evidence that even adults have abandoned their belief in absolute truth. By a three-to-one margin adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.[{5}](#)

Social scientists as well as pollsters have been warning that American society is becoming more and more dominated by moral anarchy. Writing in the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim said in *The Day America Told the Truth* that there was no moral authority in America. "We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect."[{6}](#)

Researcher George Barna, writing ten years later in his book *Boiling Point*, concludes that moral anarchy has arrived and dominates our culture today.[{7}](#) His argument hinges on a substantial amount of attitudinal and behavioral evidence, such as rapid growth of the pornography industry, highway speeding as the norm, income tax cheating, computer hacking, rampant copyright violations (movies, books, and recordings), increasing rates of cohabitation and adultery, Internet-based plagiarism, etc[{8}](#).

When asked the basis on which they form their moral choices, nearly half of all adults cite their desire to do whatever will bring them the most pleasing or satisfying results.

Although the Bible should be the basis of our moral decision-making, the survey showed that only four out of every ten born again Christian adults relies on the Bible or church teaching as their primary source of moral guidance.{9}

The survey also found that the younger generation was even more inclined to support behaviors that conflict with traditional Christian morals. "Among the instances in which young adults were substantially more likely than their elders to adopt a nouveau moral view were in supporting homosexuality, cohabitation, the non-medicinal use of marijuana, voluntary exposure to pornography, profane language, drunkenness, speeding and sexual fantasizing." {10}

Clearly, Christians are neither thinking nor behaving as Christians. And a large part of the problem centers on this abandonment of a belief in absolute truth. If Christians believe that morality is relative and determined by the situation, then they have changed biblical moral principles. Today there is a critical need for Christians to think and act biblically in every area of life.

## **De-conversion**

You have no doubt known of young people who go off to college and end up rejecting their faith. The story is more common than we might imagine. Nancy Pearcey, in her book *Total Truth*, tells the story of two such people.{11}

One said, "In my senior year of high school I accepted Jesus as my Savior and became a born-again Christian. I had found the One True Religion, and it was my duty—indeed it was my pleasure—to tell others about it, including my parents, brothers and sisters, friends, and even total strangers." {12}

But his religious convictions waned when he confronted the theory of evolution. The student underwent "a de-conversion in graduate school six years later when I studied evolutionary

biology.” Who is this person? He is Michael Shermer, the director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine. He has dedicated his life to debunking Christianity and defending evolution against people who believe in intelligent design.

Another prominent atheist tells a similar story. “I was a born-again Christian. When I was fifteen, I entered the Southern Baptist Church with great fervor and interest in the fundamentalist religion.” But he also found that his religious convictions were adversely affected by the theory of evolution. He says that he left the church “at seventeen when I got to the University of Alabama and heard about evolutionary theory.”[{13}](#)

This person described his encounter with evolution as an “epiphany” and was enthralled with the implications of evolution. Who is this person? He is E.O. Wilson, Harvard professor and founder of sociobiology (which attempts to explain everything in life from an evolutionary process).

Sadly, these stories are repeated year after year at universities throughout this country. The students who go through this de-conversion may not grow up to become famous skeptics or atheists like the ones we just mentioned. But they will grow up without a solid, Christian faith.

Teenagers who are raised in stable Christian homes, educated in Christian schools, all too often go to college and reject their Christian faith. They fall prey to the naturalistic, evolutionary foundation of modern education. Or they adopt one of the current intellectual or cultural fads on campus.

So how are we to better prepare these young people for their college experience? A key element is to teach a Christian worldview. As our secular culture becomes more hostile to Christian ideas, it is more difficult to live out our Christian worldview consistently. When the culture was more



hospitable to Christian values, a Sunday school understanding of Christianity could survive. Now we live in a culture hostile to those values. A rudimentary understanding of Christianity in such a hostile culture will soon wilt and die.

Young people, and youth ministry to young people, must be more intentional if Christian beliefs are to survive. Teaching a Christian worldview and training young people in the basics of apologetics are absolutely crucial if their faith is to survive.

## **Dichotomy of Truth**

A Christian worldview should encompass all of reality. But the world today (and even most Christians) has divided truth into two categories. Francis Schaeffer used the concept of a two-story building. Science and reason are found on the lower story. Religion and morality can be found in the upper story.

Nancy Pearcey says that the upper story is the realm of private truth. This is where we hear people say such things as “that may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me.” Or to put it another way, the lower story is modernism, while the upper story is postmodernism.

This dichotomy of truth has served to marginalize Christianity. When Christians attempt to speak to moral issues of the day, their perspective is dismissed because critics believe that it is in the realm of private truth. So when they speak on subjects ranging from bioethics to science to public policy, the world perceives these comments as merely subjective value assumptions.

Unfortunately, Christians have also accepted this dichotomy of truth. They assume that science deals with facts and their faith deals with values. And they also assume that the two can exist simultaneously and independently of each other.

A good illustration of this can be found in a recent article in which a young writer described her first day in a theology class at a Christian high school. “My theology teacher drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other side. He informed us that the two are as divided as the two sides of the blackboard—the *heart* is what we use for religion, and the *brain* is what we use for science.”[\[14\]](#)

Even more disturbing was the fact that in a classroom of some two hundred students, she was the only one who objected to the teacher’s division of truth. Sadly, this is how more and more Christians have decided to deal with the conflicting and confusing facts of the modern world. And this is how we are supposedly “preparing” young people for college and society.

We need to give young people more than just a “heart” religion which will most certainly fail to equip them for the hostility towards Christianity found in modern society. They need a “brain” religion that includes at least training in worldview and apologetics.

Christian education and youth ministry must be more than opening the session in prayer. It must address this dichotomy of truth that places science and reason on one story of the building and leaves religion and morality on another story of the building. If we don’t address this problem, we will continue to turn out students who are Christians in their private life but essentially secular in their public life. And ultimately, their brains win out over their hearts so they end up living and thinking like non-Christians.

## **Christian Worldview**

There are many elements to a Christian worldview, and the Probe Web site is full of articles that will help you in the development of a Christian worldview. A key verse in this endeavor is Mark 12:30: “And you shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Jesus is telling us that we cannot live with a dichotomy of truth. We are to love God with our heart, soul, and mind. We cannot live our Christian life out on two different floors of a building where science and reason are on one story of the building and religion and morality are on another.

Jesus is also telling us that we must strive to know God intimately. He describes this as a whole-hearted, consuming desire to know God. Christianity isn't a hobby; it's a lifestyle. We are to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Another important verse is 2 Corinthians 10:5: “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” The apostle Paul wrote these words because he knew how important it was for Christians to have a Christian worldview in the midst of the pagan, secular culture of his day.

Notice that he describes the Christian mind in terms of warfare. We are engaged in a battle of worldviews and must be prepared for battle. We are to put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, he is our commander in this battle of worldviews.

Another key verse is Colossians 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” The apostle Paul's words warn all Christians not to be “taken captive” by false philosophy. How true that is especially for young people headed off to college.

When we consider these last two verses, we notice an interesting contrast. Either we take every thought captive (2

Cor. 10:5) or we run the risk of being taken captive (Col. 2:8) by false philosophies.

A final verse is 1 Peter 3:15: "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." The Greek word *apologia* is where we get our word apologetics. It does not mean to apologize. But it does mean to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

Christianity requires both offense and defense. While 2 Corinthians 10:5 focuses on the "offensive" nature of Christianity, 1 Peter 3:15 focuses on its "defensive" nature. We must always be ready to give an answer for our faith as we engage a world that is often hostile to the Christian worldview.

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## What Happens After Death? A Christian Perspective

*Dr. Pat Zukeran brings a biblical perspective to a question we all would like to know: what happens to me after I die? He looks to the Bible to determine what we can and cannot know about our life after we pass out of our present bodies.*



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

# Differing Perspectives on Death

For the entire existence of mankind, we have struggled with the question, "What happens after death?" Our answer to this dilemma has great implications for our life here on earth. Although many avoid the issue, we must sooner or later address the question. There are many competing answers to this question.

Atheists believe that at death one ceases to exist. There is no afterlife or eternal soul that continues in eternity. All there is to look forward to is our inevitable death, the future death of mankind, and the universe. It is in the face of this future that the atheist must seek to find meaning and purpose for his own existence.

The Eastern and New Age religions that hold to a pantheistic worldview teach that one goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation until the cycle is broken and the person becomes one with the divine. What form a person becomes in the next life depends on the quality of life lived in the previous life. When one unites with the divine, he ceases to exist as an individual, but becomes part of the divine life force, like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

Those who hold to the animistic or tribal religions believe that after death the human soul remains on the earth or travels to join the departed spirits of the ancestors in the underworld, also called the realm of the shadows. For eternity they wander in darkness, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Some of the spirits of the deceased may be called upon to aid or torment those on earth.

Islam teaches that at the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise. The rest will be consigned to hell. The Koran teaches that in paradise men will be drinking wine and entertained by heavenly maidens and that they may

take several of these maidens for their wives.

Most worldviews must accept their belief in the afterlife on *untested* faith, but the Christian hope is sure for two reasons; the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of God's Word. The Bible gives us the true view of what happens after death. However, many Christians have a misunderstanding of the afterlife. Some believe that they become one of the angels, others believe they go into a state of "soul sleep," while others believe they will be floating on clouds playing harps. In this article, we will examine some popular misconceptions of what lies beyond the grave and perceive what the Bible teaches.

Christians can be assured that death is not something to be feared. Instead, at death we arrive home in heaven. To live means we exist in a foreign country. Death has lost its sting and now is a victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

## Near Death Experiences

For the past thirty years, thousands of people have reported experiencing what are called near death experiences (NDEs). NDEs are encounters where a person, being in full awareness, leaves the body and enters another world. Such experiences have resulted in life transformation in many individuals. What are we to make of these accounts?

Let us understand that NDEs come from those who have been *clinically* dead, not *biologically* dead. In clinical death, external life signs such as consciousness, pulse, and breathing cease. In such cases, biological death results if no steps are taken to reverse the process. Biological death, on the other hand, is not affected by any amount of attention, for it is physically irreversible.[\[1\]](#)

The NDE accounts occur at various stages of clinical death.

Some occur when the patient is comatose, very close to death, or pronounced clinically dead. Other accounts occur when the patient's heart stops beating. Others occur while the patient's brain ceases to register any activity on the EEG monitor. There have not been any cases of biological or irreversible death for a significant amount of time followed by a resurrection.

What has intrigued scientists and theologians in their study of NDEs is that many of the patients have similar experiences. These include leaving the body and watching from above as doctors work on it, entering a dark tunnel, seeing light, seeing others, meeting a spirit being, experiencing peace, and then returning to the body.

Scientists and doctors from various worldviews have sought to explain this phenomenon. Those from an atheistic worldview have sought to give naturalistic explanations. Their explanations range from hallucination induced by medication, chemical reactions the brain experiences in near death crises, previous encounters long forgotten, and others. These fall short of explaining NDE events.

Many NDEs have occurred without medication. Drowning victims are one example. Also, thousands of NDE victims were able to clearly describe places and people with exact detail while they were clinically dead. One girl, while near dead, was able to describe what her family did that night at home, what was made for dinner, where everyone sat and even what was said. Others were able to describe in detail objects in rooms nearby and far away from them. One patient described a shoe on the rooftop of a hospital. When the nurses looked, they found the shoe exactly as described. A boy in an accident involving his brother and mother told those around him moments before he died, "They are waiting for me now." The doctor discovered that at that exact time in another hospital the boy's mother and brother had just died. Dr. Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland provide a comprehensive discussion of NDEs in their book



*Beyond Death*, arguing that naturalistic explanations cannot satisfactorily explain the events that occur in NDEs.

NDEs may not conclusively prove there is a heaven or hell, but they do indicate that at death the soul separates from the body, and that a person's spirit is conscious and coherent at death.

However, NDEs do not accurately reflect what lies beyond the grave. NDEs deal with accounts that give a short glimpse behind the curtain of death and therefore they give us an incomplete picture. Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus "is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Christ overcame biological death and lives forevermore as ruler over all creation. His supremacy over everything was established through His resurrection. Also, we know that Satan masquerades as an angel of light and can produce counterfeit appearances. It is imperative that we evaluate all experiences in light of Scripture.

## **Can We Communicate with the Dead?**

Do the spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate with the living? One of the most popular current TV shows is "Crossing Over," with psychic John Edward. He, like other psychics, claims to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. He amazes spectators with his ability to reveal details about which only the deceased loved one may have known. From this communication, people attempt to receive comfort, advice, and encouragement.

The Bible teaches that communication with the dead is not possible. Throughout the Bible God commands His people not to indulge in the practice of necromancy, the art of communicating with the dead.

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 states,

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead . . .

The Canaanites consulted spirits and the dead in hopes of gaining power and predicting future events. This practice is an abomination to God and it is for this reason the Canaanites were ejected from the land. Israel was warned not to imitate the Canaanites or they too would suffer a similar fate.

Contacting the dead is forbidden because the spirits of the dead cannot contact the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him.

Who, then, are mediums and spiritists contacting? If they are indeed contacting a spiritual being, it is most likely a demonic counterfeit. Although the demonic spirit may communicate some truths, the ultimate intention of the spirit is to deceive and take one away from the Lord. This practice can ultimately lead to demonic possession and injury to the person.

In Acts 16:16 Paul encountered girl who could predict the future because a spirit possessed her. Knowing this, Paul eventually cast the spirit out of the girl. Throughout the Bible the practice of necromancy is forbidden.

Some will try to defend necromancy by pointing to 1 Samuel 28. Here Saul requests the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel from the grave. The spirit of Samuel arises and delivers a prophetic message to Saul. Bible scholars take two views on this. Some believe it was a demonic counterfeit masquerading as Samuel. I believe since the prophecy given came to pass, this was indeed Samuel the prophet. Despite Saul's

disobedience to God, God made an exception here.

Whichever view you take, it is clear this verse does not encourage one to consult mediums. Saul at this point in his life was out of God's will and because the Spirit of God had left him, he could not receive any word from God. In desperation, he disobeyed God as was the pattern of his life and suffered the consequence. His story teaches us a lesson and is not an example to follow.

## **One Minute After Death**

What happens when we breathe our final breath? The Bible teaches what will occur.

First our immaterial soul and spirit will be separated from our physical body. Second, we will immediately receive the judgment that will determine our eternal destiny. Those who have trusted in Christ's payment on the cross for our sins will enter into eternal life in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 5:8 states, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." There will be no delay in a state of unconsciousness many call "soul sleep." We will immediately be in God's presence.

Second, the soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle with sin that Paul described and all Christians fight comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

Those who reject this gift, will receive what they have chosen, eternity separated from God in Hell. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." There is no second chance and there is no cycle of reincarnation. Our eternal destiny is determined by

the decision we make for Christ here on earth.

Many assume that after receiving Christ all that remains is a joyful entrance into heaven. Scripture teaches that Jesus will reward us according to how we lived our life on earth. He taught this principle in the parable of the talents in Luke 19. Each servant was entrusted to administer the talents the master gave him. Upon the return of the master, each servant had to give an account for his stewardship. The wise servants were rewarded doubly while the wicked servant was removed.

The lesson for the Christian is that each of us will give an account for our time here on earth. This is not the same as being judged on our salvation status. Christ's death on the cross allows all who believe to enter God's kingdom. We will be judged on our works done since the time of our salvation. This judgment of believers is called the *Bema Seat judgment*. This event is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work, which he has built upon it, remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul states that Christ is our foundation. Our works are the building on this foundation. The materials of gold, silver, and precious stones refer to works done with pure motives for the glory of God. The works of wood, hay, and straw are works done with the wrong motives to glorify self.

At the Bema Seat, our works will be tested with divine fire. Those works that were done for the glory of God will endure

the flames and will be our reward. Some will regretfully see all their works on earth burned up before their eyes and enter heaven with little or no reward.

The unbeliever will be judged and sentenced to hell. At the end of the age, he faces the Great White Throne judgment. Here, all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time are judged based on their rejection of the Savior. They are then thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Revelation 20:11-15 says:

And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; . . . and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Knowing that as Christians we will one day give an account for our lives, we should live as wise stewards over what God has given us. Knowing the fate of the unsaved should fill us with boldness to share Christ unashamedly, with urgency to all. Knowing what lies beyond the grave should motivate us to live life on earth with a mission.

## **What Will We Be Like in Heaven?**

Upon our physical death, the soul is separated from the body and enters immediately into the presence of the Lord. Looking again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, he says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." The soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. As discussed above, Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle that Paul and all

Christians fight with sin comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

We will not remain in heaven as a soul without a body. At God's appointed time, there will be a final resurrection where the spirit will be unified with the resurrected body. Although Christians have various views on when this resurrection will take place, we all agree on the resurrection of the body. What will the resurrected body look like?

Philippians 3:20-21 says, "And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." 1 John 3:2 promises, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

From these two passages we know that our glorified bodies will be like that of Christ. We will not be deified, but we will have the same qualities of His resurrection body. First, our heavenly bodies will be our glorified earthly bodies. Christ's body that died on the cross was the same one that was resurrected. His glorified body was able to travel through walls, appear suddenly, and ascend to heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:1 reads, "[W]e have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." The hands of God will make the resurrected body. 1 Corinthians 15:39-40, 42b-43 tells us:

All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body,

it is raised a spiritual body.

In answering the mockers of the resurrection, Paul explains that our heavenly bodies will possess flesh that is of a different variety than our earthly ones. They will be bodies of flesh, but as different from our earthly bodies as humans are from animals.

We further conclude that, like a seed, the body will be sown or buried and then one day be raised to life. It is buried in death, decay, weakness, and dishonor. When it is resurrected, it will be changed in every way. It is raised imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. We will then have eternal, permanent, and perfected bodies.

We will also maintain our identities. In Luke 16:23, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham all retained their identity. Imagine, one day we will no longer struggle with the weakness of sin, sickness, and aging. A great future is in store for those in Christ.

## **What Will We Do in Heaven?**

What will we do in heaven for all eternity? Some envision playing golf for eternity, while others envision saints floating on clouds strumming harps of gold. Although great thoughts, they fall short of the glorious future that actually awaits those in Christ. We are told relatively little about what activities will occur in heaven. We are only given a brief glimpse of our life to come.

First, the moment that saints of all the ages anticipate is seeing the Lord they served face to face. This will be the first and greatest moment after physical death. From then on we will have fellowship in His presence for all eternity.

Second, our life in heaven involves worship. A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:1-5:

After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. . . ." And again they shouted, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah." Then a voice came from the throne saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him both small and great."

Like the sound of roaring waters comes the praise from the saints of all ages. Recently the men from our church described the experience of singing the hymn How Great Thou Art at a Promise Keepers conference. Nothing they said could accurately describe that majestic experience. The closest they could come to putting it into words was, "Awesome! Just awesome!" Can you imagine what it will be like when we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" along with the saints of all ages in the presence of God? Our worship here is preparation for our future, grand worship in heaven.

Third is the aspect of rest. Heavenly rest here does not mean a cessation from activity, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. In Hebrews 4:9-11 the writer, addressing the people of God states, "There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." Heaven is the final goal reached after our pilgrimage here on earth. We will rest from our sufferings and struggles against sickness, the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Fourth, we will serve the Lord. Luke 19:11-27 teaches a parable about stewardship. The wise servants who multiplied their master's talents were given rule over ten and five cities. Revelation 22:3 tells us, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him." In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul rebukes the carnal Christians who



cannot settle their own disputes and asks them, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" In Revelation 3:21 the Lord Jesus promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne." Apparently we will be given authority over a sphere in God's eternal kingdom. How much we are given depends on our faithfulness to Him on this earth.

Fifth, we will experience fellowship with God and with one another. One of the most painful experiences in life is to say goodbye. Whether it is to see loved ones move to another residence or because of death, farewells are a painful time. For the Christian, there is hope in knowing, our goodbyes are not permanent. One day we will meet again and this time we will never say goodbye again. What awaits the believer after death is a glorious future that cannot truly be imagined!

## **Notes**

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# The Council of Nicea

*Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.*

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

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.”[\[1\]](#) So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to “ . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.[\[2\]](#) Another writes, “The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible.”[\[3\]](#)

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, "Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son" (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

## **Arius**

Let's look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his

bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."[\[4\]](#) He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."[\[5\]](#)

## Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."[\[6\]](#) It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, "My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . ."[\[7\]](#) This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually

baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine's active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

## **Athanasius**

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly

God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death.”{8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief “. . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost.” {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ’s oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.



## Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.[{10}](#) Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."[{11}](#)

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

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