

Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

Utilitarianism is an ethical system that determines morality on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. A modern form of utilitarianism is situation ethics. Kerby Anderson examines the problems with this ethical system, and evaluates it from a biblical perspective.



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

You have probably heard a politician say he or she passed a piece of legislation because it did the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens. Perhaps you have heard someone justify their actions because it was for the greater good.

In this article, we are going to talk about the philosophy behind such actions. The philosophy is known as utilitarianism. Although it is a long word, it is in common usage every day. It is the belief that the sole standard of morality is determined by its usefulness.

Philosophers refer to it as a “teleological” system. The Greek word “telos” means end or goal. This means that this ethical system determines morality by the end result. Whereas Christian ethics are based on rules, utilitarianism is based on results.

Utilitarianism began with the philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Utilitarianism gets its name from Bentham’s test question, “What is the use of it?” He conceived of the idea when he ran across the words “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” in Joseph Priestly’s *Treatise of Government*.

Jeremy Bentham developed his ethical system around the idea of pleasure. He built it on ancient hedonism which pursued

physical pleasure and avoided physical pain. According to Bentham, the most moral acts are those which maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This has sometimes been called the “utilitarian calculus.” An act would be moral if it brings the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain.

John Stuart Mill modified this philosophy and developed it apart from Bentham’s hedonistic foundation. Mill used the same utilitarian calculus but instead focused on maximizing the general happiness by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. While Bentham used the calculus in a quantitative sense, Mill used this calculus in a qualitative sense. He believed, for example, that some pleasures were of higher quality than others.

Utilitarianism has been embraced by so many simply because it seems to make a good deal of sense and seems relatively simple to apply. However, when it was first proposed, utilitarianism was a radical philosophy. It attempted to set forth a moral system apart from divine revelation and biblical morality. Utilitarianism focused on results rather than rules. Ultimately the focus on the results demolished the rules.

In other words, utilitarianism provided for a way for people to live moral lives apart from the Bible and its prescriptions. There was no need for an appeal to divine revelation. Reason rather than revelation was sufficient to determine morality.

Founders of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law and one of the founders of utilitarianism. He developed this idea of a utility and a utilitarian calculus in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781).

In the beginning of that work Bentham wrote: “Nature has

placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.”{1}

Bentham believed that pain and pleasure not only explain our actions but also help us define what is good and moral. He believed that this foundation could provide a basis for social, legal, and moral reform in society.

Key to his ethical system is the principle of utility. That is, what is the greatest good for the greatest number?

Bentham wrote: “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.” {2}

John Stuart Mill was a brilliant scholar who was subjected to a rigid system of intellectual discipline and shielded from boys his own age. When Mill was a teenager, he read Bentham. Mill said the feeling rushed upon him “that all previous moralists were superseded.” He believed that the principle of utility “gave unity to my conception of things. I now had opinions: a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion; the inculcation and diffusion of what could be made the principle outward purpose of a life.”{3}

Mill modified Bentham’s utilitarianism. Whereas Bentham established an *act* utilitarianism, Mill established a *rule* utilitarianism. According to Mill, one calculates what is

right by comparing the consequences of all relevant agents of alternative rules for a particular circumstance. This is done by comparing all relevant similar circumstances or settings at any time.

Analysis of Utilitarianism

Why did utilitarianism become popular? There are a number of reasons for its appeal.

First, it is a relatively simple ethical system to apply. To determine whether an action is moral you merely have to calculate the good and bad consequences that will result from a particular action. If the good outweighs the bad, then the action is moral.

Second, utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine revelation. Many adherents to this ethical system are looking for a way to live a moral life apart from the Bible and a belief in God. The system replaces revelation with reason. Logic rather than an adherence to biblical principles guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian.

Third, most people already use a form of utilitarianism in their daily decisions. We make lots of non-moral decisions every day based upon consequences. At the checkout line, we try to find the shortest line so we can get out the door more quickly. We make most of our financial decisions (writing checks, buying merchandise, etc.) on a utilitarian calculus of cost and benefits. So making moral decisions using utilitarianism seems like a natural extension of our daily decision-making procedures.

There are also a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an “end justifies the means” mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But we all know that the end does *not* justify the means.

If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia.

The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. A particular act cannot be judged as good simply because it may lead to a good consequence. The means must be judged by some objective and consistent standard of morality.

Second, utilitarianism cannot protect the rights of minorities if the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. Americans in the eighteenth century could justify slavery on the basis that it provided a good consequence for a majority of Americans. Certainly the majority benefited from cheap slave labor even though the lives of black slaves were much worse.

A third problem with utilitarianism is predicting the consequences. If morality is based on results, then we would have to have omniscience in order to accurately predict the consequence of any action. But at best we can only guess at the future, and often these educated guesses are wrong.

A fourth problem with utilitarianism is that consequences themselves must be judged. When results occur, we must still ask whether they are good or bad results. Utilitarianism provides no objective and consistent foundation to judge results because results are the mechanism used to judge the action itself.

Situation Ethics

A popular form of utilitarianism is *situation ethics* first proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book by the same name.[\[4\]](#) Fletcher acknowledges that situation ethics is essentially utilitarianism, but modifies the pleasure principle and calls it the *agape* (love) principle.

Fletcher developed his ethical system as an alternative to two extremes: legalism and antinomianism. The legalist is like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus who had all sorts of laws and regulations but no heart. They emphasized the law over love. Antinomians are like the libertines in Paul's day who promoted their lawlessness.

The foundation of situation ethics is what Fletcher calls the law of love. Love replaces the law. Fletcher says, "We follow law, if at all, for love's sake."[\[5\]](#)

Fletcher even quotes certain biblical passages to make his case. For example, he quotes Romans 13:8 which says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law."

Another passage Fletcher quotes is Matthew 22:37-40. "Christ said, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Proponents of situation ethics would argue that these summary verses require only one absolute (the law of love). No other universal laws can be derived from this commandment to love. Even the Ten Commandments are subject to exceptions based upon the law of love.

Situation ethics also accepts the view that the end justifies the means. Only the ends can justify the means; the means cannot justify themselves. Fletcher believes that "no act apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning whatsoever."[\[6\]](#)

Joseph Fletcher tells the story of Lenin who had become weary of being told that he had no ethics. After all, he used a very pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy to force communism on the people. So some of those around him accused him of believing

that the end justifies the means. Finally, Lenin shot back, "If the end does not justify the means, then in the name of sanity and justice, *what does?*"[\[7\]](#)

Like utilitarianism, situation ethics attempts to define morality with an "end justifies the means" philosophy. According to Fletcher, the law of love requires the greatest love for the greatest number of people in the long run. But as we will see in the next section, we do not always know how to define love, and we do not always know what will happen in the long run.

Analysis of Situation Ethics

Perhaps the biggest problem with situation ethics is that the law of love is too general. People are going to have different definitions of what love is. What some may believe is a loving act, others might feel is an unloving act.

Moreover, the context of love varies from situation to situation and certainly varies from culture to culture. So it is even difficult to derive moral principles that can be known and applied universally. In other words, it is impossible to say that to follow the law of love is to do such and such in every circumstance. Situations and circumstances change, and so the moral response may change as well.

The admonition to do the loving thing is even less specific than to do what is the greatest good for the greatest number. It has about as much moral force as to say to do the "good thing" or the "right thing." Without a specific definition, it is nothing more than a moral platitude.

Second, situation ethics suffers from the same problem of utilitarianism in predicting consequences. In order to judge the morality of an action, we have to know the results of the action we are about to take. Often we cannot know the consequences.

Joseph Fletcher acknowledges that when he says, “We can’t always guess the future, even though we are always being forced to try.”^[8] But according to his ethical system, we have to *know* the results in order to make a moral choice. In fact, we should be relatively certain of the consequences, otherwise our action would by definition be immoral.

Situation ethics also assumes that the situation will determine the meaning of love. Yet love is not determined by the particulars of our circumstance but merely conditioned by them. The situation does not determine what is right or wrong. The situation instead helps us determine which biblical command applies in that particular situation.

From the biblical perspective, the problem with utilitarianism and situation ethics is that they ultimately provide no consistent moral framework. Situation ethics also permits us to do evil to achieve good. This is totally contrary to the Bible.

For example, Proverbs 14:12 says that “There is a way *which seems* right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” The road to destruction is paved with good intentions. This is a fundamental flaw with an “ends justifies the means” ethical system.

In Romans 6:1 Paul asks, “Are we to continue sinning so that grace may increase?” His response is “May it never be!”

Utilitarianism attempts to provide a moral system apart from God’s revelation in the Bible, but in the end, it does not succeed.

Notes

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, printed in 1781 and published in 1789 (Batoche Books: Kitchener, ON Canada, 2000), 14.

2. Ibid.

3. John Stuart Mill, "Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education," *Autobiography*, 1873 (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14).
4. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).
5. Ibid., 70.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. Ibid., 121.
8. Ibid., 136.

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The Sovereignty of God

Rick Wade helps us understand the full meaning of the sovereignty of God highlighting its immense practical importance. If God is truly sovereign, then what He says He will do, He can and will bring to pass. It is the choice of our sovereign God to endow us with free will and as sovereign He can make it so without limiting His sovereign power. God has promised us a glorious future and He has the power and the resolve to make it happen.

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



What's the Issue?

In whom or in what do people place their trust these days? Money? Their social group? Themselves? Some use exercise to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and maybe even add years to their lives. Some look to spiritual practices, or work for a safer environment. Such things have their proper place, but should they be our source or sources of confidence? We all live with a basic insecurity that causes

us to look for something stable to hold onto. It is obvious that there are forces in this world stronger than we are, some of which have no concern for our welfare. So we latch on to something that will see us through whatever problems might come our way.

Although Christians are to attend to their financial, physical, and social welfare (among other things), they are look to God ultimately for their security. We're derided by some for seeking a "crutch" or a "security blanket," but everyone looks for support in one place or another. The question is, Which crutch or security blanket is true and sufficient for our needs? Christians look to the true God Who has promised to be our "help in times of trouble."

Because of our different personalities and situations in life, we look for different things in God. What do you want in a God? What do you need in a God? Love? Justice? Mercy? No matter what we might need in a God, if that God lacks one particular thing, the others will do little good. That is the power to "pull it off," to exercise His love, justice, and mercy, and to do all the things He says He will do without opposition powerful enough to deter Him. We need our God to be sovereign; to be, as Arthur Pink said, "the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will."[1](#)

Often when the subject of God's sovereignty comes up among Christians, it's in the context of the sovereignty/free will debate. Although I will address that matter at a later point, my desire is that we will see the sovereignty of God as a foundation for confidence rather than simply a topic for debate.

God's sovereignty has immense practical importance. For one thing, it makes Him our proper object of worship. He is the almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all

that exists. There is none higher, none more worthy of worship and honor.

For another thing, that God is sovereign means He can be counted on, for nothing can stand against Him. He can be counted on for our salvation. He can be counted on to carry us through times of difficulty such that nothing touches us that is not in keeping with His desires for us. And He can be counted on to keep all the promises He has made to us.

Characteristics of Sovereignty

What does the Bible say about God that causes us to believe He is sovereign? For one thing, God is called by names that convey the meaning of sovereignty. In the Old Testament, He is called *Adonay*. Second Samuel 7:22 in the NIV reads: "How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears." In the New Testament, God is called *despotēs*, from which we get our word "despot." This word "denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life." The term is usually used over against the word *doulos* or "slave."^{2} In Rev. 6:10 we read where those slain for their testimony "called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"

Another thing we see in Scripture is that God has characteristics that call for ascribing sovereignty to Him.

First, God exercises rightful *authority*. He has the right to do with the creation what He desires because it is His creation. He also is active in His creation, contrary to the deistic understanding which is that God created the universe but then left it to run according to natural laws with little or no intervention on His part.

Second, God has the *power* to do what He desires with His universe. "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as

nothing,” Daniel wrote. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?’” (4:35).

Third, God has the *knowledge* required to rule over all. He knows what’s going on, and exactly what needs to be done. He knows the past, present, and future perfectly.

Fourth, God has the *will* to do what He desires. He does what He says He will do. (Is. 46:9, 10; 55:11)

Biblical Examples

These attributes are seen in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, for example, God showed His sovereignty in the experience of Moses and the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt. He showed His *authority* when He simply stepped in and told Moses what He would do for His people and later when He overrode Pharaoh’s ruling and showed who was really in charge. He demonstrated His *power* by turning Moses’ staff into a serpent; by making Moses’ hand leprous and then healing it; through sending the plagues upon the Egyptians; and then by parting the sea before the fleeing Israelites. “By this you shall know that I am the LORD,” He said (Ex. 7:17). God had perfect *knowledge* of the plight of the Israelites (3:7, 9), and He knew what He would do with and for them (3:12, 19, 20, 22). Finally, He was faithful to His promises; His *will* was not thwarted.

God showed His sovereign rule in the New Testament as well in the experience of Mary. He showed His *authority* over this young woman when He simply stepped into her life and told her what He was going to do (Lk. 1:26ff). He claimed to have the *power* to do what He desired: “For nothing will be impossible with God,” said the angel (v. 37). God *knew* Mary (v. 30), and He knew what her future held because He had plans for Her (vv. 31, 35). And He faithfully fulfilled His promises, according

to His *will*, as Mary knew He would (1:42; 2:6, 7; see also her exclamation of praise in 1:49-55).

These are only two of numerous illustrations of the sovereign authority of God in Scripture. We can read about similar demonstrations in the lives of other people such as Job (Job 38-41; 42:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:31, 32, 34-35), Joseph (Gen. 50:20), and Jesus (Acts 2:23, 24). And that's just a small sampling.

But God's sovereign rule didn't end with the writing of the Bible. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is still sovereignly active in His creation. God is "the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords" who will draw history as we know it to a close with the coming of Christ "at the proper time" (1 Tim. 6:15). He determines the times and boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26). Not only did He create all things, Paul writes that "in Him all things hold together" (Col. 2:17). Notice the present tense in Eph. 1:11 which says that God is the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will."

Sovereignty and Free Will

The problem of the tension between God's sovereign control and man's free will is a perennial one among Christians, especially theology students! While this is an interesting debate (to some), it easily overshadows any discussion of the benefits of God's sovereignty. Battle lines are drawn and the debate commences, with the result that sovereignty becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Nonetheless, it seems inappropriate to ignore the issue in a discussion of sovereignty. So I'll offer just a few comments, not to attempt to settle the issue, but to bring a few points to light for you the reader to consider.

From our previous discussion, we already have a basic

understanding of what sovereignty is. What about free will? Note that here we aren't talking about the freedom that comes when we are released from the power of sin through faith in Christ. According to Scripture, we are enslaved to whichever master we choose to follow. But to be "enslaved" to Christ is to be free to be and do what we were made to be and do.

We're talking here about freedom of the will, the ability to choose or determine one's actions without coercion. Because one's actions are so strongly influenced by one's upbringing, religious beliefs, circumstances of life, etc., our situation can never be one of complete indeterminacy. {3} Thus, the issue at hand doesn't pit completely free will against God's control. It really is over our ability to make uncoerced, significant choices for which we can be held responsible: it is about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Just as we read of a God in control of the history of His creation throughout Scripture, we also observe people making choices for which they are either rewarded or punished. It seems clear enough in Scripture that we are able to make uncoerced choices. Jesus bewailed the condition of Jerusalem in His day: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," He said, "and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). The Jews are blamed for their choice—or lack of it. We're even commanded to make choices: "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua commanded (24:15). Jesus told us to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15) as if we could choose to do so. Abraham received what God had promised because he chose to obey God (Gen. 22:15-18).

But if we have this freedom to choose, how can God be truly sovereign over the course of history? What a conundrum!

One principle that absolutely must remain paramount is that Scripture is our final authority, not reason. This isn't to say the scriptural position is against reason; it's merely an

affirmation that our reason is not up to fully grasping God and His ways. We have to make do with what He tells us; all speculation beyond that is merely—well, speculation.

What do we read in the Bible? We read that both God is in control and that we can be legitimately held responsible for our choices. And we don't have to find one verse in support of one and another verse in support of the other! In Gen. 50: 20, Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Peter rebuked the Jews at Pentecost: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," he said (Acts 2:23). That the executioners bore at least some of the guilt is clear from the fact that Jesus asked for their forgiveness on the cross (Lk. 23:34). In Isaiah we read that it was God who sent the Assyrians to punish Judah, but then punished them for doing it with the wrong attitude (10:5-15)!

This issue typically arises in discussions of the matter of election to salvation. Jesus and the apostles made the offer as though listeners (or readers) could accept it or reject it. God doesn't play games; it would make the whole call to repentance and salvation a farce if our choice had nothing to do with it. We're told to "repent and believe in the Gospel," (Mk. 1:15). But we're also told that it is God who chooses (cf. Jn. 15:16; Rom. 9:14-22).

This duality is also seen in our prayer life. We're taught that all things come to pass according to God's will, but also that our prayers make a difference. Paul said that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). But through Ezekiel God said, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (22:30, 31). Someone might say that it is God who inclines us to pray,

but that doesn't diminish the fact that we can be scolded for not praying as though the responsibility were ours to do so (James 4:2).

People who spend much time thinking about this matter tend to lean more heavily to one side than to the other. It's important to note, however, that we do not lose a bit of tension by emphasizing one over the other—either God's sovereignty or man's free will. If we overemphasize God's sovereignty, there is the difficulty of understanding the judgment of God of those who weren't elected.[{4}](#) How does this mesh with the scriptural teaching that God doesn't show favoritism, or to the command to love all people, even our enemies? On the other hand, if we overemphasize man's free will, how can a man ever be saved? "An excessively narrow Arminianism," says Mark Hanna, "lapses into synergism (the union of human effort or will with divine grace)." It diminishes the enslaving power of sin, and it gives us the power to limit God. [{5}](#)

Because of these tensions, I'm inclined to agree with Donald Carson who says that "the sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be explored."[{6}](#) It is an issue that I personally have had to let stand without any real hopes for final resolution. Some might consider this an "easy out," but I'm content to see this as one of the "secret things" spoken of in Dt. 29:29.

However, that doesn't mean the matter of God's sovereignty isn't important. As I see it, the important question is, How shall I live with both biblical truths in view: that God is sovereign over all, and that I will be held responsible for my choices? I think the old hymn "Trust and Obey" sums it up. I have been given the responsibility to obey God. But I'm thankful that the final burden of accomplishing His will doesn't rest on me! For that, I am to trust Him. This is the crux of the sovereignty-responsibility issue as far as I'm concerned. While we have the ability and responsibility to

choose, we can have confidence that God's plan will be accomplished, that His promises will be fulfilled, and that in the end, everything is going to turn out just right.

The Significance of Sovereignty for Our Lives

Let's wind up this brief overview with a look at some applications of God's sovereignty in our lives.

First, that God is sovereign makes clear who is to be the focus of our worship. All glory goes to Him. To Jesus "be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen," John said (Rev. 1:6). "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:12) the angels sang. When we worship individually and corporately, our eyes should be on the sovereign God rather than on ourselves. Although we will share in the glories of Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), God will not give His glory away to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11). He is the One who should get all the credit.

That God is sovereign means that God's redemptive purposes will not be thwarted. He will build His church (Matt. 16:18), and we can know we are part of it. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

It also means that all God has foretold will surely come to pass. He is working out His plans (Is. 42:5-9), and nothing will take away what God has for us. No one can hold back His hand (Dan. 4:35). He is able to keep His promises, and because He is true to His word, He can be counted on to keep them (Is. 55:11; 2 Tim. 2:13; cf. Rev. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6).

In addition to that, because the sovereign God is also the God of love, He can be trusted in the fullest sense. The awesome power of God is a fearful thing to His enemies (Matt. 10:28;

Heb. 10:31). But to those who love Him, the combination of His sovereignty and love makes it possible for us to truly rest, to live without fear. This is in stark contrast to gods of other religions who constantly have to be appeased to avert their anger, or even to the gods of our secular society, such as money, power, health, and prestige, all of which can let us down.

Finally, that God is sovereign means He will ultimately triumph over evil. We're told that in the end the great enemy death will be done away with (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes," John writes. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4).

Earlier I noted that the topic of God's sovereignty easily becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Just as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should serve to bring comfort to those who sometimes doubt their ability to hold on to God, the doctrine of sovereignty should serve to comfort those who fear, to encourage those who understand clearly their own limitations, and to provide a counter to the pessimism of our day. While being fully aware of the futility of the course of this world, we should still be optimistic people, because God has promised us a glorious future, and He has the power and resolve to make it happen.

Notes

1. A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 19.
2. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Lord, Master," by H. Bietenhard.
3. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "free will." See also Dagobert D. Runes, ed. *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Free-will," by Ledger Wood.

4. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 60.
5. Hanna, 59.
6. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 2.

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The Meaning of the Cross

Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ' has brought the topic of Jesus' suffering and death into the national conversation. Rick Wade explores the meaning of the cross.



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

A Scandal At the Center

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created quite a bit of controversy, both inside the church and out. One objection from Christians is that the film is imbalanced for not giving due attention to the resurrection of Jesus. There is at least one reason I disagree. That is because, as theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, the focus today is primarily on the resurrection, and the cross takes second place.^[1] I recall Carl Henry, the late theologian, noting in the 1980s that the emphasis in evangelicalism had shifted from justification by faith to the new life. We talk often about the positive differences Christianity can make in our lives because of the resurrection. Gibson has forced us to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. And that's a good thing.

Before the foundation of the world, it was established that redemption would be accomplished through Jesus' death (Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Peter wrote that we were "ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Isaiah 53:5 reads: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

But what a way to save the world! It flies in the face of common sense! From the time of Christ, the crucifixion as the basis of our salvation has been a major problem. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18a). The Greeks saw the cross as foolishness (literally, "moronic"), for they believed that truth was discovered through wisdom or reason. For the Jews it was a scandal, a stumbling block, for they couldn't believe God would save through a man accursed. They asked for signs, but instead got a crucified Messiah.

In modern times the cross was a problem because it meant we could not save ourselves through our own ingenuity. In postmodern times, while many young people feel an affinity with Jesus in His suffering, they have a hard time accepting that this is the only way God saves. And the atonement was much more than a simple identification with suffering humanity.

It is easy for us to rush past the cross and focus on the empty tomb in our evangelism. Think about it. How many of us make the cross central in our witness to unbelievers? The new life of the resurrection is a much easier "sell" than the suffering of the cross. We want to present a Gospel that is appealing to the hearer that grabs people's attention and immediately makes them want it.

In our apologetics, our arguments and evidence must be presented in terms unbelievers understand while yet not

letting unbelievers set the standards for us. Paul was an educated man, and he had the opportunity to show off his intellectual abilities with the philosophers in Corinth. But Paul wouldn't play the game on their turf. He wouldn't rest the Gospel on philosophical speculation as a system of belief more elegant and persuasive than the philosophies of the Greeks. In fact, he unashamedly proclaimed a very unelegant, even repulsive sounding message. He knew the scandal of the cross better than most, but he didn't shy away from it. He made it central.

A key word today among Christians is "relevant." We want a message that is relevant to contemporary society. But in our search for relevance, we can unwittingly let our message be molded by what current fashion considers relevant. We become confused between showing the relevance of the Gospel to our true situation and making the Gospel relevant by shaping it to fit the sensibilities of our neighbors.

Os Guinness had this to say about relevance:

By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.[\[2\]](#)

Guinness doesn't deny the relevance of the Gospel. Indeed, it is part of our task to show how it is of ultimate relevance to our situation as fallen people. If the message of Scripture is true—that we are lost and in need of a salvation we cannot secure on our own—then there is nothing more relevant than the cross of Christ. For that was God's answer to our problem. But it is relevant to our true situation as God sees it, not according to our situation as we see it.

Sin and Guilt in Modern Times

The cross of Christ addresses directly the matter of sin. But what does that mean? Do people “sin” anymore? What a silly question, you think. But is it? Of course, we all agree that people do things we call “bad”. But what is the nature of this “badness”? Is it really sin? Or, is something “bad” just something inconvenient or harmful to me? Or maybe a simple violation of civil laws? Sin is a word used to describe a violation of God’s holiness and law. While the majority of people in our country still believe in God, the consensus about what makes for right and wrong is that we are the ones to decide that, that there is no transcendent law. If there is no transcendent law, however, what are we to make of guilt? Is there such a thing as objective guilt? What do we make of subjective guilt—of guilt feelings?

As the battles of World War I raged in Europe, P.T. Forsyth reflected on the question of God and evil and the meaning of history. He reviewed the ways people had sought peace and unity and found them all wanting. Reason, basic emotions or sympathies, the fundamental workings of nature, and faith in progress all were found wanting. Turning back in history he could find no “plan of beneficent progress looking up through man’s career.”^{3} Anytime it seemed enlightenment had come, it would be crushed by war. In his own day, World War I dashed the rosy-eyed hopes of progress being voiced. He said, “As we become civilised [sic], we grow in power over everything but ourselves, we grow in everything but power to control our power over everything.”^{4} But what if we looked to the future? Could hope be found there? If the past couldn’t bring in a reign of love and unity, he asked, why should we expect the future to? What is there to make sense of the world we know?

The problem was, and is, a moral one, Forsyth said. “All deep and earnest experience shows us, and not Christianity alone,

that the unity of the race lies in its moral centre, its moral crisis, and its moral destiny." What could possibly deal adequately with the guilt, "the last problem of the race"?{5} Is there anything in the history of our race that offers hope?

From the beginning, the church has taught that our fundamental problem is sin, and the cross of Christ provides hope that sin can and will one day be overcome. In modern times, however, the concept of "sin" seems rather quaint, a hold-over from the days of simplistic religious beliefs. Arthur Cushman writes:

The concept of sin is largely outmoded in modern secular thinking because sin implies some form of disobedience against an absolute moral law having to do with man's relationship with God, and not too many people believe any such relationship exists. It would not be the same as social misconduct which has to do with man's relationship to man and is highly relative but obviously cannot be denied. We have reached the point where social custom has displaced the law of God as the point of reference, where mores have replaced morals.{6}

We seem to be caught between two poles. On the one hand, we accept the Darwinist belief in our accidental and even materialistic nature—really no more than organic machines. On the other, we can't rid ourselves of the thought that there's something transcendent about us, something about us which is other than and even greater than our physical bodies which relates to a transcendent realm of some kind. We recognize in ourselves a moral nature that expresses itself through our conscience. In short, we know we do wrong things, and we know others do them, too. The problem is that we don't seem to know the nature and extent of the problem nor its solution. Many believe that there is no God against whom we sin, or if there is a God, He is too loving to hold our mistakes against us.

From a historical perspective, this is quite a turn-about, says Cushman:

Throughout history there has never been a society like our own in which the reality of sin has been so generally denied. Even in the worst days of the Roman Empire men felt the need to propitiate the gods, not so much because they had an exalted view of the gods but because they had a more realistic view of their own worthiness. It is a curious thing that even some of the cruelest of the Roman Emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, for example, were very conscious of themselves as sinners. We may call it superstition, but it was a testimony to a very real sense of inward unworthiness which was not based on man's relationship to man but rather man's relationship to the gods.{7}

On the other hand, despite the contemporary dismissal of sin, guilt is still a constant presence in the human psyche. Karl Menninger writes:

I believe there is a general sentiment that sin is still with us, by us, and in us—somewhere. We are made vaguely uneasy by this consciousness, this persistent sense of guilt, and we try to relieve it in various ways. We project the blame on to others, we ascribe the responsibility to a group, we offer up scapegoat sacrifices, we perform or partake in dumb-show rituals of penitence and atonement. There is rarely a peccavi [confession of sin or guilt], but there's a feeling.{8}

"This is a phenomenon of our day," writes Custance: "a burden of guilt but no sense of sin."{9}

But to what is the nature of this guilt? If there is no objective moral law that stands outside and above us all, what is guilt and who is guilty? Who judges us?

In the film, *A Walk on the Moon*, Pearl begins to have an affair with a traveling salesman. Pearl's husband, Marty, is a good man, but a bit of a square. It's 1969; Woodstock is about to make the news. And Pearl, who got pregnant by Marty when she was 17, is feeling a need to experiment, to capture what

she missed by having to get married and starting the family life so early. When Pearl's affair is discovered, her husband is distraught. So is her daughter, Alison, who saw Pearl with her lover at Woodstock behaving like the teenagers around them. She's broken up that her mother might leave them.

But in all that happens following Pearl's confession, there is no mention of her affair being morally wrong. When she confessed, she told Marty she was sorry. Later, she told him she was sorry she'd hurt him. But her deed was at least somewhat excusable because there were things Pearl wanted to try, and her husband was too square, he didn't listen, he made jokes when she tried to suggest experimenting, especially sexually. Even in her interactions with others, there is no mention of her act being morally wrong. When Alison told Pearl she had seen her at Woodstock, her complaint was that she was the teenager, not Pearl (implying it would be okay for Alison to go wild at Woodstock but not Pearl). Pearl's mother-in-law pointed out what the early marriage cost Marty: a college education promised by Marty's boss, who withdrew the offer when Pearl got pregnant. "Do you think you're the only one with dreams that didn't come through?" she asked.

So the affair was understandable given Marty's old-fashioned ways (which he shows to be shedding by switching the radio from a big band station to rock station, and when he's shown dancing to Jimi Hendrix on the stereo). The problem was the hurt Pearl cost a good man and a teenage girl. And that's about all there is to sin and guilt anymore.

According to one modern view, guilt is nature's way of teaching us what not to do in the future that has caused us problems in the past. Dr. Glenn Johnson, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, said "Guilt seems to be a very primitive mental mechanism that was programmed into us to protect us in the future from mistakes we made in the past." It is a "simple debriefing and rehearsal process that the mind engages in after perceiving that something negative has taken place and

has caused painful and/or anxious feelings. . . . By forcing repeated reviews of a painful experience and the behaviors and elements leading up to it and associated with it, guilt essentially burns into our brains the connection between our behavior and the uncomfortable feelings we feel.”{10}

What can we do about guilt? According to Dr. Johnson, the issue is behavior and what might need to be changed to prevent future problems for us. “When guilt is appropriate,” says Dr. Johnson, “tell yourself that. You might modify intensity with anti-anxiety medications or relaxation exercises—but if the bulk of the guilt feelings are avoided, so will the learning be.” In other words, learn from your mistakes. Inappropriate, excessive guilt, says Dr. Johnson, can be dealt with using “hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery, NLP, Reiki, etc. . . . The focus of the self-help stuff should be on letting one’s self grow from experience,” he says, “trusting in one’s own ability to be a better person, allowing one’s self permission to make mistakes and go through losses, trusting in some form of higher power, etc.”

People come up with all kinds of ways to rid themselves of guilt feelings. One of the strangest I found on the internet, one with a New Age flavor, was Aromatherapy Angelic Bath Kits provided by Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc.{11} All one needs to do is pour some special herbs and oils in the tub, climb in, and read some prescribed meditations to “foster positive thoughts and reinforcements.”{12} One of these kits is a “ritual to clear feelings of guilt.” We’re asked, “Who hasn’t felt guilty in their lives? Who doesn’t still feel guilty about something? There are two kinds of guilt: good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt is when you have truly done something that you feel remorse for. Bad guilt is for the rest.” The forgiveness kit includes “special mixtures [which] help wash the guilty feeling away.” Notice that “good guilt” has to do with things “you feel remorse for,” not necessarily for things that are truly wrong. It’s your feelings about such

things that matter.[{13}](#) This may seem silly to you. Who would even bother with such a thing? we wonder. But people do.

Somehow, such remedies don't seem to be working. Maybe it's because we can't rid ourselves of the knowledge Paul said we have by nature: a knowledge of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).

Sin and Guilt According to God

What does God say about sin and guilt? Briefly put, God has declared us guilty of violating His holy law by our sin and deserving of eternal banishment from His presence. Contrary to current opinion, there is transcendent law that has been broken and for which there must be payment.

Imagine that someone has done something to offend you, and his reaction to your complaint is something like, "Yeah, that really bothered me, too. But I've forgiven myself of that, and I'm fine with it now." This is only a slight caricature of the mentality we all encounter today. The person clearly has missed the point that there was a real, objective violation against you!

The message of the cross is that there is a very real fracture in our relationship with God. We're told in Scripture that there is nothing we can do to make up for what we've done. Is there anything to offer us hope?

There is: the cross of Christ, "the race's historic crisis and turning-point," says Forsyth.[{14}](#) The cross dealt with our greatest need, namely, redemption. Humanists of a secular stripe who trumpeted the inevitable progress of humanity saw our fundamental nature as one of ordered process. The truth, though, is that it is "tragic collision and despair." All of man's efforts have been unable to reach down into the depths of our sinfulness and bring about fundamental change. All except that of the God-man Jesus Christ, who attacked the

moral problem head on to the point of dying on the cross and came out victorious.

Several understandings of the atonement—what Jesus accomplished on the cross—have been offered through history, and several of them have some truth in them. The key aspect of Christ's cross work was that it satisfied the demand for punishment for our sin. This is called substitutionary atonement: Jesus was substituted for us, so He took the punishment for sin in being separated from God and dying, thus paying the penalty for us. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us." (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul wrote to the Romans that "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." (Romans 8:3) And to the Galatian church he said that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

By His death on the cross, Jesus, the one who "knew no sin, became sin for us." This was done because of His love for us: "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2; Rom. 5:8) Jesus' sacrifice is appropriated by faith: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul wrote (Eph. 2:8). By putting our faith in Him, we participate in the payment He made. It counts for those who believe it and who receive Him.

I should note quickly, however, that the reality of our objective guilt isn't dependent upon our subjective guilt. In other words, whether we feel guilty or not, we are. And because we are guilty of violating God's law, we must do more than just forgive ourselves as we're taught today. We must, and may, participate in God's solution through Christ.

The Moral Triumph of the Cross

What I've been talking about is the judicial aspect of the cross work of Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

However, this payment isn't to be thought of like making a payment to the utility company for electricity. All that matters is that the money gets there. What it takes to get it there isn't really significant. The cross, by contrast, was a triumph over sin; it was a moral victory in itself. Jesus overcame evil through His perfect obedience and righteousness; "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," Paul wrote (Rom. 5:18). His death on the cross was the capstone of a life of moral victories over sin and Satan.

We're so used to thinking about Jesus as God and as sinless that we don't often think about His obedience. He said and did the things the Father told Him (Jn. 5:19, 30; 8:28). To the Jews he said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." (v. 4) Before He gave up His spirit on the cross, Jesus knew that "all things had already been accomplished." (Jn 19:28) He fulfilled the law perfectly (Matt. 5:17), and thus put the basis of our salvation on our faith in him as the one who did so, thus robbing the law of its power to encourage us to sin (cf. Rom. 8:2-4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). Jesus had defeated Satan; He had not given in to any temptation to not give up His life. He was obedient to death. (Phil. 2:8). And by His obedience He was made perfect or complete and able to be the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9; see also 2:10; 5:8; and Rom. 5:19).

P.T. Forsyth wrote that the cross "is the moral victory which

recovered the universe. The Vindicator has stood on the earth," he said. "It is the eternal victory in history of righteousness, of holiness, of the moral nature and character of God as Love."[{15}](#) He continued:

The most anomalous thing, the most poignant and potent crisis that ever happened or can happen in the world, is the death of Christ; the whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil met there for good and all. And to faith that death is the last word of the holy omnipotence of God.[{16}](#)

What is the significance of Jesus' cross work—indeed, His whole life—as a moral victory? Forsyth said that in creating the world, God revealed His omnipotence, His absolute power. In the new creation inaugurated through the cross, He revealed His moral power, His ability to triumph over His worst enemy, Satan, and the sin that infects His creation. God's power has been revealed as "moral majesty, as holy omnipotence" said Forsyth. "The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of a God but of a holy God."[{17}](#)

In the cross and resurrection, we see that good can triumph over evil now, and we have the promise that one day that triumph will be complete. Not only us but all of creation will be set free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-24).

But this isn't just a promise for the future. Because, like Jesus, we have the Spirit living in us, we can live in obedience to God; we can stand firm in the presence of the evil that wages war against us (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20). The cross bears witness to that.

The secular humanism and new spiritualism of our day have no resources for affecting us so deeply on the moral level. Christianity does—the cross of Christ—and it is this that makes it relevant for our day and for all time.

A Fully-Engaged God

It's easy to think of God as remote from us, as a judge way up there making His laws and wreaking vengeance on anyone who violates them. We hear about the love of God, but how does love fit in with a God of judgment? And if God does love us, how does He show it? Love comes near; it isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Is God willing to come near? To get His hands dirty with us?

In the cross of Jesus we see both the judgment of God and His love. Herein lies its beauty. In the cross we find a God who does not stand afar off, but takes on the worst of what His own law requires! He has pronounced judgment, but He so much wants us saved that He is willing to take on the burden of paying for it Himself. "For God so loved the world that He gave His Son," says John (3:16).

In all the brouhaha surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, one complaint heard several times was that a God who would put His Son through that isn't a God to be worshipped.[\[18\]](#) But Jesus did this freely. "No one takes [my life] from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn.10:18). And He did this knowing that as He laid His life down, so also would He take it up again (Jn.10:17). For the joy set before Him, He took up the cross (Heb. 12:2).

We wonder if God can reach us in the messiness of our lives. But God is no stranger to mess. The Bible reveals a God who isn't afraid to get dirty, who engages life even with all kinds of difficulties it may bring. This message is appealing in our day especially, to GenXers who have suffered the fallout of the excesses of earlier generations. The optimism Boomers inherited from their parents fizzled out for a lot of their children. Regarding that generation, Tom Beaudoin says this:

I have witnessed a sadness and anger about the generation's

suffering and dysfunction, a suffering that—whatever its economic reasons may be—expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism. Xers' relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. . . . Suffering is a catalyst for GenX religiosity.[{19}](#)

While they often reject the form of religion their parents embraced, many GenXers have a fascination and respect for Jesus, for his suffering didn't make sense, and yet it was redemptive.[{20}](#)

Here the true awesomeness of the cross is made plain. God, who deserves all glory and is so far above us in holiness and purity, became man, and endured horrific torture at the hands of people He created . . . for their benefit! The life and death of Christ make plain that God was willing to roll up his sleeves and engage life on earth fully, even accepting the worst it had to offer.

But, one might wonder, since Christ took on evil and won, shouldn't we be done with suffering? Eventually it will end. In the meantime we, too, learn obedience through what we suffer. If that was Jesus' way of learning, and the servant isn't above his master (Matt. 10:24), can we expect anything else? Furthermore, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that hardship isn't just an inconvenience on the road of discipleship. Redemption wasn't brought about in spite of the cross but through it.[{21}](#) Likewise, our growth comes not in spite of hardship but through it.

Someone who has suffered for many years might complain that Jesus' suffering doesn't compare. Jesus' sufferings and resurrection spanned a short period of time. But what He suffered was the experience of the weight of the guilt of the whole world on the shoulders of one who was sinless. It isn't

anything new for us to feel guilt; we can become somewhat hardened to it. But Jesus felt it to the fullest extent imaginable. This isn't to mention the hurt of the betrayal of Judas (and to a lesser extent, of Peter). Worse yet, He experienced separation from the Father, the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Jesus knew suffering.

In the cross and resurrection we see what God has promised to do for us in a compressed timeframe. But what happened to Jesus will happen for all who believe. He suffered . . . and He arose. We suffer . . . and we will rise.

Jesus allowed people to see what God is like. He not only taught truth, he lived it. People could touch Him, and feel Him touch them. They could see how He lived and how He died. The cross was a real, live illustration of love.

In Jesus, people saw goodness and love demonstrated even toward those who persecuted Him. That should be no surprise, because it was just that kind of person Jesus came to die for! Sin was overcome through a love that gave all. This is the meaning and the message of the cross, the message we, too, are to take to our world.

Notes

1. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 28ff.
2. Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 15.
3. P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 17.
4. Forsyth, 18.
5. Forsyth, 19.

6. Arthur C. Custance, *The Doorway Papers*, vol. 3, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1975), 267.
7. Custance, 274.
8. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 17.
9. Custance, 273.
10. Dr. Glenn Johnson, head-cleaners.com, www.head-cleaners.com/guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).
11. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/wellness_about.htm (February 17, 2004).
12. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/ritual_package.htm (February 17, 2004).
13. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/rituals_guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).
14. Forsyth, 19.
15. Forsyth, 121.
16. Forsyth, 122.
17. See Forsyth, 123.
18. See for example the comment by Kip Taylor in Susan Hogan/Albach, "The Purpose of the Passion," *The Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 21, 2004, 1G.
19. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 99.
20. Beaudoin, 99.
21. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

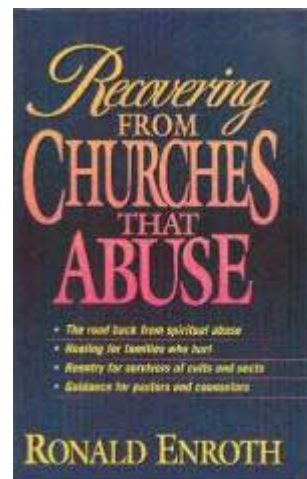
[This article is also available in Spanish.](#)



Painful Exit Process

In a previous article [Abusive Churches](#), I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.^{1} As a result of the questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.

✖ Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.



One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, “I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It’s like experiencing a death in the family.” The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, “Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.”[\[2\]](#)

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label “role exit.” Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a “vacuum.” In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member wrote, “I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don’t know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all

together.”[{3}](#)

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.[{4}](#) Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled “spiritually abusive” range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don’t ask questions and don’t make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to

disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son's wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter's prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One's spiritual quality is determined by one's allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas? Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a

need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the “sinful” world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a “true disciple,” abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: “The greatest threat to the church today is not from without but from our own leadership within.”[\[5\]](#) Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, “I have heard many pastors say to

their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them." {7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the truth. "Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims." {8} Blue continues: "Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism." {9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a "pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in

hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt.”[\[10\]](#)

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ’s example. “Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all” (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader’s heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God’s flock as a steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith*, provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don't give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God's character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that "God

is love.” In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God’s grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However, a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.[{11}](#)

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."[{12}](#) It

is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.^{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "[Abusive Churches](#)," 1993, Probe Ministries.
2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits*, (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 65.

11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

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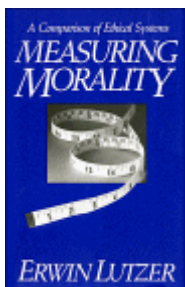
Cultural Relativism

Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.

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



John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as

cultural relativism.[^{1}](#) Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception, even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” within which humans must live.[^{2}](#) Gertz believed that

“Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics.”[\[3\]](#)

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

William Graham Sumner

A key figure who expanded on Dewey’s ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: “World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways.”[\[4\]](#) In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.

Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

Melville Herskovits

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."[\[5\]](#) In other words, a person's judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines

ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that “the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice.”[\[6\]](#) Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

Evolutionary Ethics

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve

differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics*, states his perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."[\[7\]](#) He denies the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.[\[8\]](#)

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.[{9}](#) The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's [article](#) on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.[{10}](#)

Evaluating Cultural Relativism

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils

such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God's character, revealed in the Bible provides

a reliable measure for morality.

Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 1997, 53:323.
4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.
5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.
8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).
9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).
10. Dr. Ray Bohlin, "[Sociobiology: Evolution, Genes and Morality](#)"

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Living in Babylon

How are Christians to be in the world but not of it? Don Closson offers a way to think about the American culture that God has placed us into.



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

Since the era of the Moral Majority and the rise of the so called “religious right,” there has been an ongoing debate within the Christian community about how to define the appropriate relationship between Christians and the contemporary American culture. Many believers find the teaching that Christians are to be “in the world but not of it” difficult to interpret and apply to their daily lives.

Part of our problem in relating to our culture is in identifying an accurate metaphor for modern America. Some see America as a new Israel, a nation that God has providentially blessed, a nation that is special to God in a way that other nations are not. When pressed, few would actually claim that America has replaced Israel of the Old Testament, but many see America as a uniquely Christian nation. Although one cannot dismiss the powerful influence that Christian thought has had on this country, this view of America raises some difficult questions.

For instance, how should believers respond when a majority of Americans reject the Christian worldview regarding specific moral issues such as abortion or gay rights? To what length are we required to go to maintain a Christian society? Many now believe that we are confronted with the dilemma of living in a largely post-Christian America, and that soon we will no longer have the political power to pass legislation that would enforce our views.

A few have already given in to the temptation to respond

violently when the legal system fails to promote a biblical standard, resulting in murdered abortion doctors and bombs set off outside of gay bars in the name of Christ. They reason that if God ordered the Promised Land to be purged of Baal worshippers and their sinful culture by force, violence is justified today in the U.S. to remove its sinful practices.

Christians almost seem surprised to encounter sin in America, or to discover that our culture might be following the path of European nations that had previously been influenced by biblical truth. Some act as if God has promised that America would be exempt from worldly temptations. Even though the vast majority of Christians don't stockpile weapons or plan violent revolution, some of us become angry and paralyzed by the way America has changed over the last few decades.

Rather than seeing the U.S. as the new Israel, it might be more helpful to see it as a modern Babylon. Christians in America should see a reflection of themselves in Daniel, who found himself exiled in Babylon and having to live in an alien culture that was often hostile to his faith. Or perhaps we should identify with the apostle Paul who planted churches and disciplined future leaders under the cruel and tyrannical Roman government.

Let's consider what it means to live a life worthy of the calling that we have in Christ in modern day America, and seek to better understand the admonition to be "in the world but not of it."

Aliens and Strangers

In his new book, *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon*, Marvin Olasky argues that if we are to have an influence on the culture that exists in America today, we need to see ourselves more like Daniel in Babylon than like Joshua taking the Promise Land. America is very different from Joshua's situation. Ancient Israel was a theocracy established and

ruled by God for a people who had covenanted with God to live according to Mosaic Law and to be separate from other cultures. America is neither a theocracy nor a promised land. Although America benefited from the participation of godly men and biblical ideals during its founding, it is a republic that derives the right to rule from its people. As people have moved away from strongly held Christian convictions, so have its institutions.

Olasky describes modern America as a theme park for liberty, noting that it is idolized by the rest of the world as a country that promotes nearly unlimited personal freedom without any commensurate requirement for virtue. It is very much part of the "world" or *cosmos* that the New Testament writers John, Paul and James warn us that is contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Regarding this "world" James writes, "don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (James 4:4) To be a friend of the world is to agree with a system of values that the world represents. This worldview refuses to acknowledge God's role as creator and sustainer of the universe and rejects the moral structure that He made part of its existence. It also rejects the need for a savior. It's not that there is no support for Christian virtue left in America, but that the predominant set of values found in our major institutions no longer reflects a biblical worldview.

If asked, most believers would agree that our life here on earth is principally a place to prepare for the next life. The New Testament provides a clear picture of what our relationship to the world should be characterized by. In 1 Peter (2:11-12) we are told, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he

visits us.”

Our lives here in America, or wherever God puts us, are to be characterized by the awareness that the world as it exists is not our permanent abode. Our affection for the things of this world should fade, and our desire to build God’s Kingdom should increase because we have become “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Eph. 2:19)

Ambassadors for Christ

Considerable energy is spent by sincere and well-meaning Christians to make America a more righteous nation. Their dream is to use political power to transform the American culture and its institutions into a society that becomes a beacon to the world for God’s righteousness and compassion. Others have given up on America and see separation from its worldly culture as the only appropriate Christian response, turning their backs to the political process as well as the arts and entertainment that it offers. Many Christians live in a state of constant tension between the heavenly Kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom that God has placed them into. They endure a dual citizenship that seems to pull them in two opposite directions.

The problem for Christians hoping to transform American society is that, although the Bible tells us much about the kind of culture that is to exist within the church, it says little about what kind of culture should exist outside of it. The New Testament doesn’t encourage believers to fight for political reform or even for religious freedom within the Roman political system of the day. There are many “one another” passages that describe how one believer is to relate to another believer, and there are places where we are told to pray for our political leaders and to obey our country’s laws. But little is said about the kind of political or social institutions that should be endorsed by Christians. Beyond working for justice and human dignity in a general way, how

should Christians relate to the current society that we live in?

A clear biblical teaching for all believers is that we are to be ambassadors for Christ. Some may be called vocationally to politics, the arts, or even the entertainment world, but each of us can and should be an ambassador for God's Kingdom wherever He places us and regardless of how He has gifted us as individuals. To do this well, ambassadors need to be cognizant of our sovereign's message or agenda. 2 Cor. 5:18-20 says that we have been given a message of reconciliation, and that God is using us to appeal to our neighbors to be reconciled with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

All of us desire to see our culture transformed into a reflection of God's truth, justice, and mercy. However, we also need to acknowledge the role of providence in both the timing and the extent of any future cultural revival. America has experienced awakenings in the past and God has certainly used individuals and organizations to realign our culture with His character. But ultimately the timing and the manner of revival is in God's hands and it will be accomplished by those who see themselves as ambassadors sharing Christ, not as a King David ruling on God's throne over America.

Jeremiah's Charge

Using the metaphor of believers in Babylon, it might be helpful to read how the prophet Jeremiah told the children of Israel to live among the pagans of that day. He told them to:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will

prosper.” (Jer. 29:4-7)

It is significant what Jeremiah did *not* tell the Jews to do while in Babylon. They were not told to establish the Kingdom there; it wasn't the right place or time. They were also not instructed to use guerilla tactics to overthrow the Babylonian political structures. God Himself would eventually bring about the conditions of their release to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. They were to instead seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God had sent them, and to pray to God for it. This is very similar to the language that Paul uses in writing to Timothy when he tells him to pray “for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” (1 Tim. 2:1-3) As mentioned earlier, Peter says we are to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Pet. 2:12) He literally says that we are to live a “noble lifestyle” so that the pagans will see our good works and eventually recognize and give glory to God.

Unfortunately, according to recent surveys Christians are not known for their “noble lifestyles.” In one survey, George Barna discovered that “evangelicals” ranked near the bottom of a list of population segments regarding favorable or positive impressions, right between lesbians and prostitutes.[\[1\]](#) We are often so consumed by our displeasure with what unbelievers are doing that we fail to see the activities of our daily lives in terms of ministry. When we integrate into our daily living an understanding to reflect God's image, be stewards over His creation, and love others as we love ourselves, we will begin to view all of our activities as acts of worship and service to God. As Peter reminds us regarding Christian maturity: “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:8)

The Language of Addition

How do we stand for Christ as His ambassador in America without getting depressed? It might be helpful to ask how the apostle Paul kept his cool in Athens as he viewed the various idols built for a pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, or how Daniel was able to function in a pagan Babylonian government that “praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.” (Dan. 5:23) Both men probably had to turn to God often, quiet their souls, and occasionally see some humor in the culture in which God had placed them, all the while realizing that it is ultimately God who changes cultures by working through flawed but redeemed individuals.

Marvin Olasky remarks in *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon* on the impractical focus Christians often have on using censure, boycotts, or legislation to erase sinful behavior from American society. He writes: “We need to understand that saying, ‘Thou shalt do X because God says so,’ leads to blank stares or incredulous glances. . . .”^{2} He adds “We should understand that in the American liberty theme park, we cannot eliminate the negative; so our realistic option is to emphasize the positive.”^{3} A nation that has elevated tolerance and choice to its greatest virtues is much more likely to respond to positive moral alternatives than to chastisement.

Just as Paul offered an alternative to the gods of Athens, we need to be prepared to suggest a Christian alternative to the views held by unbelievers in America. As effective ambassadors everywhere must do, we need to understand the issues of the day and respond in a manner that resonates with the culture.

When P.E.T.A. and others extol the rights of the “species of the month” while saying nothing of the killing of unborn children, we need to suggest the view that children are far more precious than chickens, dogs, and cats. When the splendor

and wonder of human sexuality is twisted and perverted in novel ways, we need to be ready to offer the benefits and beauty of monogamous heterosexual unions for both spouses and their offspring. When someone argues that morality is subjective and that anarchy is a reasonable response, we should be prepared to offer a picture of how biblically revealed virtues can profit a society. Using the language of addition will encounter far more listening ears in America than will the language of boycotts, censure, and anger.

The ultimate reason for being an effective ambassador, and for apologetics, is to improve the chances that the gospel will be heard and received. Our mission is not to merely reduce sin but to model Christ so that people will come to know and accept the wonderful message “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them . . . so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:19,21)

Notes

1. Barna Research Online, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=127&Reference=D> (Jan. 30, 2004).
2. Marvin Olasky, *Standing for Christ in a Modern Babylon* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 23.
3. Ibid.

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The Gnostic Matrix

In the wake of the mega-hit movie The Matrix, which features gnostic themes, Don Closson examines gnosticism and

the influence this philosophy has on our culture.

When *The Matrix* came out in 1999, it became an instant hit movie and a trend setter for the science fiction genre. The story takes place in a future dystopia where intelligent machines have taken over and are farming humans to generate electrical power. The matrix itself is a computer program that gives humans the illusion that they are living in a late twentieth century world when, in reality, they are existing in womb-like pods that provide nutrients while siphoning off the natural electrical current that human bodies create. The movie is known both for its visual style and its references to many postmodern and religious ideas. The writers used a biblical motif throughout their story. The main character of the movie Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is called the "one." He dies and comes to life again after being kissed by a love interest named Trinity. In this resurrected state he is able to destroy the evil agents within the matrix and appears to ascend into the heavens at the end of the movie. A ship called the *Nebuchadnezzar* is used by the rebel humans to hide from the intelligent machines and to search for the lost city of Zion. However, in spite of its use of many biblical terms, this is not a Christian movie.

In fact, *The Matrix* is syncretistic; it uses ideas from a number of religious traditions that are popular in American culture. Along with Christian notions, the authors have incorporated ideas from Zen Buddhism and Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a belief system named after the Greek word "gnosis" or knowledge. If the authors had been attempting to portray a Christian view of the human condition, they would have focused on sin and the need for a savior. Instead, the movie's characters find a kind of salvation in discovering secret knowledge and in realizing that the world is not what it appears to be. Neo becomes a Gnostic messiah, one chosen to be a way-shower out of the illusion of the matrix.

Gnostic gospels began to compete with Christianity in the

second century after Christ. Our first clue to their existence is found in the writings of early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus who defended Christian orthodoxy from these heretical ideas. The popularity of Gnosticism began to decline by the end of the third century and lay largely dormant until the recent discovery of Gnostic texts in Egypt in 1945. Now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, this remarkable find was made available in English in 1977 and has been used by both religious leaders and secular scholars to argue that a Gnostic gospel should be considered alongside the orthodox Christian message.

In this article we will consider both the content of Gnosticism and influence Gnostic ideas are having on our culture.

The Birth of Gnosticism

In December 1945, an Arab named Muhammad Ali found a jar buried in the ground near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, that contained thirteen leather-bound codices or books dating from around 350 A.D. For the first time modern scholars had access to early copies of Gnostic writings which had previously been known only through derogatory references made by early Christians.

The core beliefs of the Gnostic gospel begin with the assertion that the world in its current state is not good, nor is it the creation of a good god. In fact, the cosmos is seen as a mistake, the action of a minor deity who was unable to achieve a creation worthy of permanence. The result is a world of pain, sorrow and death filled with human beings that long to be freed from a material existence. Deep within each person is a divine spark that connects humanity with the ultimate spiritual being who remains hidden from creation. The only hope for humanity is to acquire the information it needs to perfect itself and evolve out of its current physical state. The Gnostic Jesus descended from the spiritual realm to show the way for the rest of humanity, not to die as an atonement

for sin, but to make available information necessary for self-perfection.

Although a common core of ideas is found within Gnostic writings, a variety of religious ideas were popular among its leaders. There are four second century Gnostic teachers who have contributed to our current understanding of Gnosticism. Two consist of mythical reinterpretations of the Old Testament. The *Apocryphon of John* claims to possess a vision of John, the son of Zebedee. It offers a hierarchy of deities based on the names of Yahweh, ultimately concluding with a minor god named Ialdaboath who is the angry and jealous god of the OT who falsely claims there is no other god beside him. The second writer named Justin authored *Baruch*, a work that mixed together Greek, Jewish and Christian ideas. Again, it portrays OT characters as minor deities, but both Hercules and Jesus have a role in this system. Gnostics baptized into this cult claimed to enter into a higher spiritual realm and swore themselves to secrecy.

The other two second century forms of Gnosticism were more philosophically developed. Basilides of Alexandria and Valentinus, who wrote in Rome about 140 A.D., brought together secular Greek thinking with New Testament concepts. Basilides' starting point of absolute nothingness indicates that he may have encountered Indian Hindu ideas in Alexandria. He also regarded the God of the Old Testament as an oppressive angel. But the most important Gnostic concepts are those of Valentinus. It is his system that has been borrowed from by today's New Age followers.

The Gnosticism of Valentinus

Valentinus claimed to have learned his gospel message from a student of the apostle Paul named Theodas. At the center of this Gnostic system is the notion that something is wrong, that the human condition and experience is defective. Orthodox Christianity and Judaism both point to human rebellion as the

source of this flawed existence; however Gnosticism blames the creator. Valentinus' version of creation begins with a primal being called Bythos who, after a long period of silence, emanates 30 beings called "aeons" (also known as the "pleroma"). Eventually, one of the lowest aeons, Wisdom or Sophia, becomes pregnant and gives birth to a demiurge, Jehovah, who in turn creates the physical world. The world is not "good" as indicated by the Genesis account. It is flawed and a barrier to humanity's redemption.

Valentinus argued that the fallen nature of the cosmos was not our doing, and that we each have the capacity to transcend the physical creation to achieve redemption. The key is to possess correct knowledge about reality. Like the humans suffering in the movie *The Matrix*, he believed that "the human mind lives in a largely self-created world of illusion from whence only the enlightenment of a kind of Gnosis can rescue it."[\[1\]](#) Valentinus taught that both body and soul are part of the corrupt creation and that redemption is only for the spirit or inner man. His view of personal redemption has more in common with Hinduism and Buddhism than with orthodox Christianity. To the Gnostics, Jesus is significant only because of the knowledge he possessed and the example that he set, not for being God in the flesh or for being a sacrifice for sin. Because the illusion presented to us by the world can only be corrected by the right knowledge, any guilt we feel for our rebellion against an all-powerful holy God is false guilt; for such a God doesn't exist.

The teachings of Valentinus had considerable impact on his world. Modern day Gnostics, however, don't teach all of his ideas. Let's see why.

Modern Day Gnostics

World religion scholar Joseph Campbell writes that, "We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness...", and that our main problem is that we have

merely forgotten this truth. He admonishes us to wake up to this awareness, which he adds, "is the very essence of Christian Gnosticism and of the Thomas Gospel."[\[2\]](#)

The concept of a "Christ consciousness" is common in New Age literature. The origin of this idea can be traced back to Gnostic ideas that competed with the traditional teachings of the Apostles in the early church.

As New Age thinking has progressed in its many forms, the use of Gnosticism as a theoretical underpinning has grown. Since English translations become widely available in the late 1970s, Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *First Apocalypse of James* have been used in conjunction with Eastern religious writings to support both New Age radical environmentalism and neo-pagan feminist religion. Gnostic writings have motivated scholars like Elaine Pagels and Joseph Campbell to find parallels between Buddhism and Christianity. They have also lent support to the belief that it was a Christ (or Buddha) consciousness that made Jesus a powerful example of how humans can experience enlightenment. But are the Gnostic scriptures faithfully represented in these modern ideas?

Author Douglas Groothuis argues that the Gnostic worldview is often misrepresented by its modern adherents. For instance, Pagels and psychologist Carl Jung translate the teachings of the Gnostics into general psychological truths while rejecting their teachings regarding the origin and operation of the universe. It seems inconsistent at best to adopt the supposed outcomes of the Gnostic faith while rejecting its core teachings.

Neither does Gnosticism affirm current attitudes towards the environment found among many New Agers. Gnosticism teaches that all matter, including mother Earth, is seen as a deterrent towards reaching our true spiritual state. In fact, Gnosticism holds that all matter is a mistake. It is certainly

not to be worshipped or revered as many of our pantheistic friends do.

Although female divinities are part of the Gnostic hierarchy of emanations and the New Age journal *Gnosis* devoted an entire issue to the Goddess movement, the Gnosticism of the early church era was decidedly not feminist. The divinity Sophia is at the heart of the problem facing humanity; her offspring brought into existence the physical world from which the Gnostic must escape.

Women in general do not fair well in the Gnostic texts. The *Gospel of Thomas* quotes Peter as saying, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus supposedly adds, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven." [\[3\]](#) Jesus shows no sign of Gnostic influence in the New Testament. He never demeans women for being female, nor does he suggest that they become men.

Finally, Gnostic texts are used to support the New Age doctrine of tolerance for those on a different spiritual journey, and the popular belief in reincarnation. But Groothuis notes that "several Gnostic documents speak of the damnation of those who refuse to become enlightened, particularly apostates from Gnostic groups." [\[4\]](#) It's interesting that these passages aren't often taught by New Age followers.

The Reliability of Gnostic Texts

Is the *Gospel of Thomas* a more reliable witness to the real teachings of Christ than the New Testament? Is it factually more trustworthy? Famed Bible scholar F. F. Bruce is pretty blunt regarding the competing truth claims. He writes, "There is no reason why the student of this conflict should shrink from making a value judgment: the Gnostic schools lost because

they deserved to lose.”{5} Few would question the historical record that Gnosticism was rejected by the church in the second and third centuries. But what about today? Are there valid reasons to reevaluate the legitimacy of the Gnostic writings?

First, a decision must be made between the two conflicting depictions of Christ. The content and the literary style of the Gnostic writings compared to the biblical record are so different that they cannot both be accurate.

It’s significant to note that the Gnostic texts do not offer a recounting of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Much of what is attributed to Jesus is detached from any historical setting. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* depicts Jesus “more as a lecturer on philosophy than a Jewish prophet.”{6} The Apostles supposedly ask Jesus, “Lord, we would like to know the deficiency of the aeons and of their pleroma.”{7} Jesus responds with Gnostic teachings about God the Father and a female deity whose disobedience results in the physical cosmos. This is not the Jesus of the New Testament.

Another question regarding Gnostic texts is their date of origin. The documents found at Nag Hammadi are quite old, probably dating from A.D. 350-400. The original writings are even older, but not prior to the second century A. D. Thus, the consensus of most scholars is that they appeared after the New Testament had been completed. The *Gospel of Truth*, which is attributed to Valentinus, actually quotes the New Testament at length. It would be odd to accept its authority over the New Testament.

Unfortunately, the documents have also experienced considerable physical deterioration. The English translation of The Nag Hammadi Library exhibits many ellipses, parentheses, and brackets that point to gaps in the text due to this deterioration. Since most of the texts have no other

manuscript copies available, their accuracy is questionable.

There is also the question of authorship. The *Letter of Peter to Philip* is usually dated at the end of the second century or possibly into the third.^[8] Since this is long after Peter's death, it is considered to be pseudepigraphic, falsely attributed to a noteworthy individual for added credibility.

Finally, the most popular and ardently defended text, the *Gospel of Thomas*, was not mentioned in the early church until the early third century.

The Gnostic view of Jesus was rejected by the early church and should be rejected today.

Notes

1. >Stephan A. Hoeller, *Valentinus: A Gnostic For All Seasons*, <http://www.gnosis.org/valentinus.htm> on 12/20/2002
2. Douglas Groothuis, *Jesus In an Age of Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 74.
3. *Gospel of Thomas*, 114.
4. Groothuis, 100.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon Of Scripture*, (InterVarsity Press, 1988), 277.
6. Groothuis, 104.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 107.

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Evaluating Miracle Claims

Probe's Michael Gleghorn demonstrates that not all miracle claims are equal. Although genuine miracles have occurred, a

careful evaluation reveals that many claims are spurious.

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



Are They Alien Events?

I recently spoke with a Christian woman who told me of the concern she felt for many of her family members who had embraced the doctrines of Christian Science. As we discussed how she might effectively communicate the gospel to those she loved, she mentioned one of the main difficulties she faced in getting a fair hearing. Apparently, some of her family members had been surprisingly healed of various physical ailments. And naturally enough, they interpreted these healings as confirming the truth of Christian Science.

What are we, as Christians, to make of such claims? Are they miracles? What are we to think about the many sincere people, holding vastly different beliefs, who claim to have personally experienced miracles? And what about many of the world's great religious traditions that claim support for their doctrines, at least in part, by an appeal to the miraculous? Should we assume that all such claims are false and that only Christian miracle claims are true? Or might some miracles have actually occurred outside a Judeo-Christian context? Are there any criteria we can apply in evaluating miracle claims to help us determine whether or not a miracle has actually occurred? And could there be other ways of explaining such claims besides recourse to the miraculous?

Before we attempt to answer such questions, we must first agree on what a "miracle" is. Although various definitions have been used in the past, we will rely on a definition given by Richard Purtill. "A miracle is an event brought about by the power of God that is a temporary exception to the ordinary course of nature for the purpose of showing that God has acted in history."^{1} A miracle, then, requires a personal, supernatural being who is capable of intervening in nature to

bring about an effect that would otherwise not have occurred.

If this is what miracles are, then some religions have no real way of accounting for them. Take Christian Science for instance. "The Christian Science view of God is impersonal and *pantheistic*." {2} In this system, "miracles" can be nothing more than "divinely natural" events. {3} But if a true miracle requires the intervention of a personal being who is beyond nature, then Christian Science has no place for such events because it does not admit the existence of such a being. As David Clark has stated: "Pantheism has no category labeled 'free act by a divine person.' So miracles are as alien to all forms of pantheism as they are to atheism." {4} Thus, far from demonstrating the truth of Christian Science, a genuine miracle would actually demonstrate its falsity! While such events may still have occurred, they can hardly be used as evidence in support of such traditions

Are They Legendary Events?

Apollonius of Tyana was, like Jesus, a traveling first century teacher. Like Jesus, he is credited with having performed a variety of miraculous feats. He is said to have healed the sick, cast out demons and predicted the future. He is even said to have raised the dead!

In a fascinating passage from his biography we read the following:

A girl had died...and the whole of Rome was mourning...Apollonius...witnessing their grief, said: 'Put down the bier, for I will stay the tears that you are shedding for this maiden'....The crowd...thought that he was about to deliver...an oration...but merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death..." {5}

Readers familiar with the Gospel of Luke will recognize that

this story is quite similar to the account of Jesus raising the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). But isn't it inconsistent for Christians to affirm that Jesus really did perform such a miracle while denying the same for Apollonius? Not necessarily.

Suppose that the story about Apollonius is merely legendary, while the story about Jesus is truly historical. If that were so, then it would clearly make sense for Christians to deny that Apollonius raised someone from the dead while simultaneously affirming that Jesus really did perform such a feat. There are actually good reasons for believing that this is in fact the case.

Norman Geisler draws a number of significant contrasts between the evidence for Jesus and that for Apollonius.[\[6\]](#) First, the only source we have for the life of Apollonius comes from Philostratus. In contrast, we have numerous, independent sources of information about the life of Jesus. These include the four canonical gospels, many New Testament letters, and even extra-biblical references in writers like Tacitus, Josephus and others. Second, Philostratus wrote his biography about 120 years after Apollonius' death. The New Testament was written by those who were contemporaries and/or eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. The point, of course, is that the further one gets from the original events, the more likely it is that accounts may become contaminated by later legendary developments. Third, Philostratus was commissioned to write his work by the wife of a Roman emperor, most likely as a means of countering the growing influence of Christianity. He thus had a motivation to embellish his account and make Apollonius appear to be the equal of Jesus. The New Testament writers, however, had no such motivation for embellishing the life of Jesus. Finally, Philostratus admits that the girl Apollonius allegedly raised may not have even been dead![\[7\]](#) Luke, however, is quite clear that the widow's son was dead when Jesus raised him.

This brief comparison reveals that not all miracle claims are as historically well-attested as those of Jesus.

Are They Psychosomatic Events?

Amazing healings are among the most frequently cited miracle claims. Although many of these claims may be false, many are also true. But are they really miracles?

Some estimates indicate that up to 80 percent of disease is stress related. While such diseases are real, and really do afflict the body, they originate largely from negative mental attitudes, anxiety and other unhealthy emotions. For this reason, such diseases can often be healed through a reduction in stress, combined with positive mental attitudes and healthy emotions. But such healings should not be viewed as miracles because they do not involve God's direct, supernatural intervention.

If this is true, then we must carefully distinguish between psychosomatic events and those that are truly miraculous. Psychosomatic illnesses have psychological or emotional (rather than physiological) causes. Thus, people afflicted with such disorders may get better simply by coming to believe that they *can* get better. In other words, psychosomatic disorders can often be alleviated simply by faith—whether in God, a priest, a doctor, a pill, or a particular method of treatment. But there is nothing miraculous about this kind of healing. “It happens to Buddhists, Hindus, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and atheists. Healers claiming supernatural powers can do it, but so can...psychiatrists by purely natural powers...”^{9} Obviously, healings of this sort cannot be used as evidence for a particular belief system because all belief systems can account for them.

But are there any differences between supernatural and psychological healings that might help us decide whether or not a particular healing was truly miraculous? Norman Geisler

lists a number of important distinctions.[{10}](#) First, supernatural healings do not require personal contact. Jesus occasionally healed people from a distance (John 4:46-54). In contrast, psychological healings often do require such contact, even if this simply involves laying one's hands on the television while an alleged faith-healer prays. Second, when a person is healed supernaturally there are no relapses. But relapses are common after psychological healings. Finally, a person can be healed of *any* condition by supernatural means, including organic diseases and major birth defects. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5) and restored the sight of one born blind (John 9). In contrast, not all conditions can be healed psychologically. Such methods are usually effective only in treating psychosomatic illnesses.

Thus, not every claim for miraculous healing is a genuine miracle. Only those healings that offer clear evidence of Divine intervention can fairly be considered miracles.

Are They Deceptive Events?

It appeared to be a miracle. The young man claimed he could see without an eye! Norman Geisler recounts an amazing demonstration he once witnessed in a seminary chapel back in the early 70s.[{11}](#) It involved a young man who had injured his left eye as a child. It was later surgically removed and replaced with a glass eye. For three years his father prayed, asking God to restore his son's vision. One day, his son excitedly announced that he could see with his glass eye! His father believed that God had worked a miracle. And apparently he wasn't the only one.

At the chapel service the young man's father shared how the physicians who had examined his son had confirmed that his vision had been restored despite the removal of the young man's eye! The demonstration seemed to prove that this was indeed the case. The young man's glass eye was removed and his good eye was covered with a blindfold that had been inspected

by one of the students in the audience. After various items had been randomly collected from those in attendance, the young man proceeded to read what was written on them! Needless to say, all who witnessed the performance were stunned by what appeared to be a genuine miracle. But was there another explanation? Although he initially thought that he had witnessed a miracle, Dr. Geisler later came to believe that he might have been deceived. But why?

It turns out that any skilled performer of magic tricks can do the very same thing. By applying some invisible lubricant to the cheek before a performance begins, the magician can have coins and clay placed over his eyes, along with a blindfold, and still read what has been handed to him. How is this possible? Dr. Geisler explains: "By lifting his forehead under the bandages, a small gap is made down the bridge of his nose through which he can see. It is not a miracle; it is magic."[\[12\]](#)

Since magic can often appear miraculous, we must carefully evaluate miracle claims for clear evidence of divine intervention. What are some differences between miracles and magic that may keep us from being deceived?[\[13\]](#)

First, miracles are of God and serve to glorify God. Magic is of man and usually serves to glorify the magician. Second, no deception is involved in miracles. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he was really dead, and had been for four days (John 11:39). But deception is an essential component of human magic. Finally, a miracle fits into nature in a way that magic does not. When Jesus healed the man born blind (John 9), He restored the proper function of his natural eyes. By contrast, in the story above the young man claimed to see without an eye at all! While one is clearly of God, the other is simply odd.

Are They Demonic Events?

The Bible affirms the existence of both Satan and demons, evil spirit beings with personal attributes who are united in their

opposition to God and His plans for the world. Although vastly inferior to God, they still possess immense intelligence and power. Is it possible that at least some of the apparently miraculous phenomena reported in the world's religions and the occult might be due to demonic spirits?

The book of Exodus seems to indicate that the Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate the first two plagues that God brought upon their land (Exod. 7:22; 8:7). How should this be explained? While some believe the magicians relied on human trickery,[{14}](#) others think that demonic spirits may have aided them.[{15}](#)

Although we cannot know for sure which view is correct, the demonic hypothesis is certainly possible. Indeed, the Bible elsewhere explicitly affirms the power of Satan and demons to perform amazing feats. For instance, Luke tells of a slave-girl "having a spirit of divination...who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling" (Acts 16:16). Undoubtedly this was a demonic spirit for Luke records that Paul cast it out "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:18). This enraged the girl's masters because apparently, once the demon had been exorcised, the girl no longer retained her special powers (Acts 16:19).

In addition, Paul told the Thessalonians that the coming of the end-time ruler would be in "accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9). In Revelation 13 we read that Satan gives his power and authority to this wicked ruler, apparently even healing his otherwise fatal wound to the head (Rev. 13:3). Not only this, but the ruler's assistant is also said to perform "great signs" (v. 13). For instance, he is said to make fire come down from heaven and to give breath and the power of speech to an image of the ruler (vv. 13-15). The text implies that these wonders are accomplished through the power of Satan (v. 2).

This brief survey indicates that Satan and demonic spirits can indeed perform false signs and wonders that may initially appear to rival even genuinely Divine miracles. The book of Revelation tells us that the world of unregenerate humanity, deceived by such amazing signs, proceeds to worship both Satan and the ruler (Rev. 13:4). But how can we, as Christians, keep from being likewise deceived? In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts believers to put on "the full armor of God." Among other things, this involves taking up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (see Eph. 6:10-17). If we have faith in Christ Jesus, and if we are protected by "the full armor of God," we won't be easily deceived by "the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11).

Notes

1. Richard L. Purtill, "Defining Miracles," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 72.
2. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1990), 111.
3. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. "Miracles, Magic and," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 476.
4. David K. Clark, "Miracles in the World Religions," in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 203.
5. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912 [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1]), 457-459, cited in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 83.
6. Norman L. Geisler, in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian*

Apologetics, s.v., "Apollonius of Tyana," 44-45.

7. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 85.

8. Kenneth Pelletier, *Christian Medical Society Journal* 11, no. 1 (1980), cited in Geisler, "Healings, Psychosomatic," *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 301.

9. Norman L. Geisler, "Apollonius of Tyana," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 44-45.

10. *Ibid.*, 118-122.

11. The story is told in Norman Geisler, *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988), 59-60.

12. *Ibid.*, 60.

13. I take these criteria from Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, 73-76.

14. See Dan Korem, *Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 172-176.

15. See John D. Hannah, "Exodus," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 118.

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Freudian Slip

His “True Enemy”

In 1937, shortly before World War II, a Jewish doctor had a colleague who urged him to flee Austria for fear of Nazi oppression. The doctor replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?[\[1\]](#)

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said that the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life. A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling even his Jewish parents about “God Almighty”. But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his difficulties, and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as (some suggest) an “act of defiance.”

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve, he was horrified to learn of his father’s youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. “Jew! Get off the pavement!” a so-called “Christian” had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In secondary school, he abandoned Judaism for secular science and humanism. At the University of Vienna, he studied the atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist. Religion for him was simply a “wish fulfillment,” a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls.

This psychiatrist was Sigmund Freud. He became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language, religion and culture. Obsessed with what he called the “painful riddle of death,” he once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson’s death brought great grief: “Everything has lost its meaning to

me..." he wrote. "I can find no joy in life." He called himself a "godless Jew." In 1939, he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging his cancer's pain.

What factors might have influenced Freud's reaction to Christianity? Have you ever been discouraged about life or angry with God because of a major disappointment or the way a Christian has treated you? In the next section, we'll consider Freud's encounter with bigotry.

Anti-Semitism

Have you ever observed a Christian acting in un-Christlike ways? How did you feel? Disappointed? Embarrassed? Disgusted? Maybe you can identify with Sigmund Freud.

When Freud was about ten or twelve, his father Jakob told him that during his own youth, a "Christian" had knocked Jakob's cap into the mud and shouted "Jew! Get off the pavement!" Jakob had simply picked up his cap. Little Sigmund found his father's acquiescence to Gentile bigotry unheroic. Hannibal, the Semitic general who fought ancient Rome, became Sigmund's hero. Hannibal's conflict with Rome came to symbolize for Freud the Jewish-Roman Catholic conflict.[\[2\]](#)

In his twenties, Freud wrote of an ugly anti-Semitic incident on a train. When Freud opened a window for some fresh air, other passengers shouted for him to shut it. (The open window was on the windy side of the car.) He said he was willing to shut it provided another window opposite was opened. In the ensuing negotiations, someone shouted, "He's a dirty Jew!" At that point, his first opponent announced to Freud, "We Christians consider other people, you'd better think less of your precious self."

Freud asked one opponent to keep his vapid criticisms to himself and another to step forward and take his medicine. "I was quite prepared to kill him," Freud wrote, "but he did not

step up...{3}

Sigmund's son Martin Freud recalled an incident from his own youth that deeply impressed Martin. During a summer holiday, the Freuds encountered some bigots: about ten men who carried sticks and umbrellas, shouted "anti-Semitic abuse," and apparently attempted to block Sigmund's way along a road. Ordering Martin to stay back, Sigmund "without the slightest hesitation ... keeping to the middle of the road, marched towards the hostile crowd." Martin continues that his "...father, swinging his stick, charged the hostile crowd, which gave way before him and promptly dispersed, allowing him free passage. This was the last we saw of these unpleasant strangers." Perhaps Sigmund wanted his sons to see their father boldly confronting bigotry rather than cowering before it, as he felt his own father had done.{4}

Jews in Freud's Austria suffered great abuse from so-called Christians. No wonder he was turned off toward the Christian faith. How might disappointment and loss have contributed to Freud's anti-Christian stance?

Suffering's Distress

Have you ever been abandoned, lost a loved one, or endured illness and wondered, "Where is God?" Perhaps you can relate to Freud.

Earlier, I spoke about Freud's Catholic nanny whom he loved dearly, who was accused of theft and was dismissed. As an adult, Freud blamed this nanny for many of his own psychological problems.{5} The sudden departure—for alleged theft—of a trusted Christian caregiver could have left the child with abandonment fears{6} and the adult Freud with disdain for the nanny's faith. Freud wrote, "We naturally feel hurt that a just God and a kindly providence do not protect us better from such influences [fate] during the most defenseless period of our lives." {7}

Freud's daughter, Sophie, died suddenly after a short illness. Writing to console her widower, Freud wrote: "...it was a senseless, brutal stroke of fate that took our Sophie from us . . . we are . . . mere playthings for the higher powers.{8}

A beloved grandson died at age four, leaving Freud depressed and grief stricken. "Fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me," he admitted shortly before the child died.{9}

Freud's many health problems included a sixteen-year bout with cancer of the jaw. In 1939, as the cancer brought death closer, he wrote, "my world is . . . a small island of pain floating on an ocean of indifference." {10} Eventually a gangrenous hole in his cheek emitted a putrid odor that repulsed his beloved dog but attracted the flies.{11}

Like many, Freud could not reconcile human suffering with a benevolent God. In a 1933 lecture, he asserted:

It seems not to be the case that there's a power in the universe which watches over the well-being of individuals with parental care and brings all their affairs to a happy ending. On the contrary, . . . Obscure, unfeeling, unloving powers determine our fate.{12}

Freud's suffering left him feeling deeply wounded. Could that be one reason he concluded that a benevolent God does not exist? Do you know people whose pain has made them mad at God, or has convinced them He doesn't exist? Intellectual doubt often has biographical roots.

Spiritual Confusion

Hypocritical Christians angered Sigmund Freud. The deaths of his loved ones and his own cancer brought him great distress. His loss and suffering seemed incompatible with the idea of a loving God. So what did he think the main message of the Christian faith was?

In the book, *The Future of An Illusion*, his major diatribe against religion, Freud outlined his understanding of Christianity. He felt it spoke of humans having a “higher purpose”; a higher intelligence ordering life “for the best”; death not as “extinction” but the start of “a new kind of existence”; and a “supreme court of justice” that would reward good and punish evil.{13}

Freud’s summary omits something significant: an emphasis on human restoration of relationship to God by receiving His free gift of forgiveness through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for human guilt.

Discussions of the biblical message often omit or obscure this important concept. I used to feel I had to earn God’s love by my own efforts. Then I learned that from a biblical perspective, no one can achieve the perfection necessary to gain eternal life.{14} Freud’s view of Christianity at this point seemed to be missing grace, Jesus, and the cross.

Two years after he wrote *The Future of An Illusion*, he seemed to have a clearer picture of Christian forgiveness. He wrote that earlier he had “failed to appreciate” the Christian concept of redemption through Christ’s sacrificial death in which he took “upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone.”{15}

Freud also attacked the intellectual validity of Christian faith.{16} He objected to arguments that one should not question the validity of religion and that we should believe simply because our ancestors did. I don’t blame him. Those arguments don’t satisfy me either. But he also felt the biblical writings were untrustworthy. He shows no awareness of the wealth of evidence supporting, for example, the reliability of the New Testament documents or Jesus’ resurrection.{17} His apparent lack of familiarity with historical evidence and method may have been a function of his era, background, academic pursuits or profession.

Perhaps confusion about spiritual matters colored Freud's view of the faith. Do you know anyone who is confused about Jesus' message or the evidence for its validity?

Freud's Christian Friend

Freud often despised Christianity, but he was quite fond of one Christian. He actually delayed publication of his major criticism of religion for fear of offending this friend. Finally, he warned his friend of its release.[{18}](#) Oskar Pfister, the Swiss pastor who had won Freud's heart, responded, "I have always believed that every man should state his honest opinion aloud and plainly. You have always been tolerant towards me, and am I to be intolerant of your atheism?"[{19}](#) Freud responded warmly and welcomed Pfister's published critique. Their correspondence is a marvelous example of scholars who differ doing so with grace and dignity, disagreeing with ideas but preserving their friendship. Their interchange could well inform many of today's political, cultural and religious debates.

Freud's longest correspondence was with Pfister. It lasted 30 years.[{20}](#) Freud's daughter and protégé, Anna, left a glimpse into the pastor's character. During her childhood, Pfister seemed "like a visitor from another planet" in the "totally non-religious Freud household." His "human warmth and enthusiasm" contrasted with the impatience of the visiting psychologists who saw the family mealtime as "an unwelcome interruption" in their important discussions. Pfister "enchanted" the Freud children, entering into their lives and becoming "a most welcome guest."[{21}](#)

Freud respected Pfister's work. He wrote, "[Y]ou are in the fortunate position of being able to lead . . . [people] to God."[{22}](#)

Freud called Pfister "a remarkable man a true servant of God, . . . [who] feels the need to do spiritual good to everyone he

meets. You did good in this way even to me.”{23}

“Dear Man of God,” began Freud after a return home. “A letter from you is one of the best possible things that could be waiting for one on one’s return.”{24}

Pfister was a positive influence for Christ. But in the end, so far as we know, Freud decided against personal faith.

People reject Christ for many reasons. Hypocritical Christians turn some off. Others feel disillusioned, bitter, or skeptical from personal loss or pain. Some are confused about who Jesus is and how to know Him personally. Understanding these barriers to belief can help skeptics and seekers discern the roots of their dilemmas and prompt them to take a second look. Examples like Pfister’s can show that following the Man from Nazareth might be worthwhile after all.

Notes

1. Much of this article is adapted from Russell Sims Wright, *Belief Barriers and Faith Factors: Biographical Roots of Sigmund Freud’s Reaction to the Christian Faith and Their Relevance for Christian Ministry*, unpublished M.Th. dissertation, University of Oxford (Westminster College), May 2001.

2. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900. In James Strachey (Gen. Editor/Translator), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volumes IV and V (London: Hogarth, 1953-1966), pp. 196-197. Subsequent references to this Standard Edition are here abbreviated “S.E.”, per professional convention.

3. Sigmund Freud; Ernst L. Freud (ed.); Tania and James Stern (translators), *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1961[1970 reprint]), pp. 92-94.

4. Martin Freud, *Sigmund Freud: Man and Father* (New York:

Jason Aronson, 1983), pp. 68-71.

5. Sigmund Freud, Letters 70 (October 3-4, 1897) and 71 (October 15, 1897) to Wilhelm Fliess. In *S.E., Volume I*, pp. 261-265.

6. Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1901. In *S.E. Volume VI*, pp. 49-51.

7. Sigmund Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood, 1910. In *S.E. Volume II*, pp. 136-137; quoted in Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *Why Did Freud Reject God? A Psychodynamic Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 241-242. The bracketed word is apparently Rizzuto's.

8. Ernst Freud, Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, eds., *Sigmund Freud: His Life in Pictures and Words* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), p. 220.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Dover, 1960 [1992 unaltered reprint of 1960 Basic Books edition]), pp. 343-344.

10. Max Schur, M.D., *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1972), p. 524.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 526-527.

12. Armand Nicholi, Jr., M.D., "When Worldviews Collide: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud: A comparison of their thoughts and viewpoints on life, pain and death," Part One, *The Real Issue* 16:2, January 1998, p. 11.

13. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1928 work), pp. 23-24.

14. Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 1-5.

15. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1930 work), pp. 99-100.
16. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, p. 33.
17. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).
18. Heinrich Meng and Ernst L. Freud, eds., Eric Mosbacher trans., *Psycho-Analysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister* (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), pp. 109-110.
19. Ibid., p. 110.
20. Nicholi, loc. cit.
21. Meng and E. Freud, op. cit., p. 11.
22. Ibid., p. 16.
23. Ibid., p. 24.
24. Ibid., p. 29.

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Hindrances of the Mind: The Scandal of Evangelical

Thinking

Sometimes our presuppositions skew our understanding of Scripture and even how to use it. Rick Wade looks at some ideas and attitudes from our past that create hindrances to sound thinking.



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

In our efforts to engage our society for Christ, we need to understand that people often don't see the world aright because of problems with the way they think. Their beliefs or attitudes—or even what they think about *thinking*—create stumbling blocks. But lest we get too puffed up, we need to recognize that we aren't immune to that ourselves; Christians don't always think well, either.

Before we can effectively engage our society on this level we need to engage ourselves. We wonder why, with so many people professing faith today, we aren't able to have a greater impact on our society. It's often said that we aren't *doing* enough. Another reason is that we aren't *thinking* enough.

Some time ago evangelicals lost significance in the intellectual centers of the country. Historian Mark Noll notes that “on any given Sunday in the United States and Canada, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice, yet in neither country do these great numbers of practicing evangelicals appear to play significant roles in either nation's intellectual life.”^{1} Apart from concerns about Christians in academia, however, the rest of us should consider our own habits of thinking. I'm not speaking about the simple attainment of knowledge; I'm talking about how certain attitudes and assumptions affect how we think.

This article is a brief examination of the evangelical mind

today. What are some weaknesses in evangelical thinking that stunt our influence in society? How did we get to this place?

Noll names four characteristics of American evangelicals, our legacy from the nineteenth century: *populism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *intuitionism*. By *populism*, he means that evangelical Christians see the strength of the church (on the human level, of course) as residing in the people in the pews rather than those in the pulpits. By *activism*, he refers to the lack of patience for extended contemplation and the desire to be about the work of the Lord. *Biblicism* refers to the belief that truth is only found in Scripture. *Intuitionism* refers to the tendency to go with gut-level responses rather than studying matters with any thoroughness.

For all the possibilities this form of Christianity offers, insofar as this description is accurate, it leaves little room for the life of the mind. Yes, it's important that we *do* things for the Lord. But don't we need to *think* before we *do*? Could one of the things we need to *do* be to *think*? The Bible is indeed our final authority, but is knowledge obtainable elsewhere? And is intuition sufficient for understanding what the Bible writers meant given the fact that they wrote in another time and cultural context? Or for understanding the complex issues of our day—or even the perennial issues of the human experience?

Someone might still be wondering if this is really an important issue. As long as we're doing God's work, why do we need to waste time worrying over a lot of ivory tower speculation? Read what Noll says as he summarizes the importance of the life of the mind for the church:

Where Christian faith is securely rooted, where it penetrates deeply into a culture to change individual lives and redirect institutions, where it continues for more than a generation as a living testimony to the grace of God—in these situations, we almost invariably find Christians ardently

cultivating the intellect for the glory of God.

He continues: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." What results when serious thinking isn't a characteristic of the church? "The path to danger is not always the same," he says, "but the results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses into gross error, or simply passes out of existence." [\[2\]](#)

Did you catch that? This is no minor issue. To say that what is eternal is all that's important, that we needn't waste a lot of time on the things of this world which is destined to burn up anyway, might seem to reflect biblical teaching, but it doesn't. We aren't here suggesting that the things of the earth in themselves are more important than the things of heaven. Neither are we saying everyone has to be a scholar. What we're saying is that we need to think, we need to learn, we need to understand the world we live in if we want to be taken seriously and in turn more strongly influence the world around us. Some of us *should* be scholars, however, and scholars who can command the respect of peers both inside and outside the church. But all of us need to learn to think well on whatever level we live. We should learn *about* the world, and we should learn *from* the world. There is value in this world because it was created by God, because it is the arena in which redemption was accomplished, because it is where we live out our Christianity each day, and because it is where we meet unbelievers and seek to reach them for Christ. Our investment is in heaven, but it is here where we work out our salvation.

So, how did we get to our present state? Let's look at the development of this mentality in our nation's short history.

Pietism

Two factors from our past, which had and still have ramifications for the evangelical mind, were Pietism and populism.

Pietism had its roots in the late seventeenth century in Europe as a reaction to the cold, formalistic ritualism so prevalent in the church. Christianity seemed more a topic of philosophical speculation and argument than a living religion. Philipp Jakob Spener, a German pastor, sought reform in the lives of the people in the pews. He “instituted [pious assemblies] to meet on Wednesdays and Sundays to pray, to discuss the previous week’s sermon, and to apply passages from Scripture and devotional writings to individual lives.”^{3} In 1675, Spener wrote *Pia Desideria* (or, *Pious Wishes*) in which he outlined his ideas for reform. They included a renewed emphasis on the Bible, the revival of the priesthood of the believer, an emphasis on Christian practice, and the preaching of understandable sermons.

Pietism spread in several directions as the years passed. The Moravians, who significantly influenced John Wesley, “carried the pietistic concern for personal spirituality almost literally around the world.” Pietism was influential among Mennonites, Brethren, and Dutch Reformed Christians. Its ideas can be seen in the teachings of Cotton Mather and William Law, and in the preaching of the American Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century.

Pietism had the effect of shifting the locus of authority away from tradition and the established church leadership to the individual Christian. Not everyone was in favor of this. Some church leaders opposed the movement for selfish reasons, but some were genuinely concerned about the possibility of “rampant subjectivity and anti-intellectualism.” Separationism was another problem. Although Spener never called for it, some people did separate from the established churches.

On the positive side, one finds in Pietism a strong commitment to Scripture, the rejection of cold orthodoxy, and an emphasis on authentic personal experience. Says Noll, "It was, in one sense, the Christian answer to what has been called the discovery of the individual' by providing a Christian form to the individualism and practical-mindedness of a Europe in transition to modern times." Pietism has been a source of renewal in cold churches, an encouragement to lay people to get involved in ministry, and an impulse for individuals to always be seeking after God.

On the negative side, however, Pietism led to subjectivism and emotionalism. It provided an excuse for anti-intellectualism and for the neglect of careful scholarship. Lessons learned by Christians in previous centuries no longer needed to be considered since one's present experience with God was the most important thing. Lastly, it inclined some people to establish rather legalistic codes of morality as they sought evidence of spirituality in others' lives.

A surprising result of Pietism—given its primary goal of bringing Christians more into the light of truth—was the way it led *away* from truth. Noll notes that

Unchecked Pietism . . . played a role in the development of theological liberalism with liberalism's fascination for the forms of religious experience. It played a part in developing the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where a vague nature mysticism replaced a more orthodox understanding of God and the world. And for more orthodox believers, Pietism sometimes led to a morbid fixation upon the Christian's personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach. . . . The Pietist attack on self-conscious Christian thinking . . . meant the weakening of the faith toward sentimentality, its captivity by alien philosophies, or its decline to dangerous modernisms. [\[4\]](#)

While Pietism had (and has) its positive aspects, with respect to the life of the mind, it has had a detrimental effect. The emphasis on the individual makes the rest of the world less important, and it provides no incentive to be open to anything but the individual's own spirituality.

Populism

The second factor which continues to affect the way we think is America's populist mentality. *Populism* is a concern for "the perceived interests of ordinary people, as opposed to those of a privileged elite."[\[5\]](#) Although populism didn't form into a political movement until the late nineteenth century, it characterized the mentality of Americans from the early days of our country's history.

Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that, "In the original American populistic dream, the omniscience of the common man was fundamental and indispensable."[\[6\]](#) Class differences were rejected; egalitarianism was the new order of things. Hofstadter says that early exponents of popular democracy "meant . . . to subordinate educated as well as propertied leadership. . . . [popular democracy] reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and the well-to-do."[\[7\]](#) In fact, there developed a real bias against and a distrust of the elite, such as churchmen who were part of the hereditary structure of church leadership, and academicians.

Anti-Intellectualism

In the early days of America's founding, there was an attitude of sticking to the basic things of life. According to this way of thinking, "there is a persistent preference of the 'wisdom' of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial."[\[8\]](#)

This confidence in the intuitive wisdom of the common man, together with the distrust of the educated elite, produced in America a distinct anti-intellectualism. "Anti-intellectualism," in Hofstadter's use, does not necessarily mean "unintelligent." He defines it as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life."[\[9\]](#) Intelligence *per se* isn't a problem . . . as long as it is being put to practical use. But the contemplation of ideas which have no immediately discernible practical use is thought to be a waste of time.

Still today, the word "intellectual" usually carries negative connotations. "Intellectual" and "ivory tower" are two terms often heard together, and they aren't complimentary descriptions! Noll notes that the activist, pragmatic, and utilitarian "ethos" of America "allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment."[\[10\]](#) A problem with this mentality is that it demands the distilling of ideas into immediately usable information. Speaking of evangelicals specifically, Canadian scholar N. K. Clifford states the problem bluntly: "The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an oversimplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection. The limitations of such a mind-set were less apparent in the relative simplicity of a rural frontier society." [\[11\]](#) Our world is much more complex today, and it requires more focused, deep, and sustained thinking.

Someone might object that evangelicals have done some serious thinking and writing in some areas of study, and that is certainly true. Apologetics is one area in which that is the case. But as Noll says, "In our past we have much more eagerly leaped to defend the faith than to explore its implications

for the intellectual life.”{12} It is one thing to shore up one’s own defenses (a worthy project in itself), but quite another to seek to understand the world for its own sake—or even for the sake of enlarging our understanding of God. For those who *are* out in the secular marketplace and in academia, are distinctively Christian beliefs informing their work? Or are they having to leave them at home to make life easier on the job (or to be able to stay in their positions at all)?

Antitraditionalism

In an article on the era of the Enlightenment, I wrote this:

Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past now had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today? Besides, people in the past were dominated by the church. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.{13}

We were now able to look at the facts for ourselves; we had no need for anyone else to teach us anything. Change was in the air; what was new was what was important, not what happened in the past. Thus was formed the characteristic of *antitraditionalism*.

We assume that, since the world is so much different today, those who’ve gone on before us have little to say to us since they couldn’t imagine a world like ours. We forget that human nature hasn’t changed, and that wisdom isn’t bound by time or by technological advancement. Nor has God changed through time in keeping with our advancement! We can learn from those

who've gone on before us about what the Scriptures mean, what God is like, how we can best live lives marked by wisdom, and more.

Evangelism and preaching

What significance did these ideas and attitudes have for the proclamation of the Gospel?

First, with respect to evangelism, the revivalism of the nineteenth century set the tone for popular evangelical thought. *Revivalism* was a movement in Christianity that emphasized the whole-hearted acceptance of the Gospel message *now*. It developed in the eighteenth century and came to full flower in the nineteenth. Revivalism was very populist in tone; the message of salvation was aimed at the broadest audience. Preaching was kept simple and "aimed at an emotional response."[\[14\]](#) The choice was plain: repent and believe the Gospel *today*. Don't wait until tomorrow. There was no need to give sustained thought to the matter, no need to look to others—either contemporaries or those who lived in the past—for insight and understanding about the faith. Salvation was individual and the call to decide was immediate.[\[15\]](#)

As revivalism moved into the South and West, "it became more primitive, more emotional, more given to ecstatic' manifestations."[\[16\]](#) Preachers often adopted the anti-intellectual prejudices of the populace. Adding to the already populist mentality was the fact that pioneers moved west much faster than institutions could follow (including schools). Missionaries "would have been ineffective in converting their moving flocks if they had not been able to develop a vernacular style in preaching, and if they had failed to share or to simulate in some degree the sensibilities and prejudices of their audiences—anti-authority, anti-aristocracy, anti-Eastern, anti-learning."[\[17\]](#)

This prejudice against learning began to harden among both

laity and clergy. Hofstadter explains the characteristic understanding of the relation of faith and learning this way: "One begins with the hardly contestable proposition that religious faith is not, in the main, propagated by logic or learning. One moves on from this to the idea that it is best propagated . . . by men who have been [sic] unlearned and ignorant. It seems to follow from this that the kind of wisdom and truth possessed by such men is superior to what learned and cultivated minds have. In fact, learning and cultivation appear to be handicaps in the propagation of faith."[\[18\]](#)

A New Way of Knowing Truth

Pietism and populism served to foster a mentality of subjectivism, antitraditionalism, and anti-intellectualism. To this was added a framework of thought drawing from science and philosophy which significantly affected the way evangelicals thought about their faith and the world.

Within the church, there was a need to find a way to prevent Christian doctrine from becoming a purely individualistic affair following the separation from the Roman Church. If there were ways to prove doctrine objectively true, Christians would have to give assent to it. With respect to society in general, now that science was the source of knowledge, evangelicals felt the need to show that Christianity could stand up to rigorous scientific verification so the church would remain a respected institution. The issue was how we know truth, and how this understanding was to be applied to the interpretation of the Bible.

Although romantic tendencies were becoming more visible in Protestantism during this period, the orientation of conservatives was primarily in the direction of fact rather than feeling. In the eighteenth century a new framework of thought began developing which seemed to answer these needs, and which has strongly influenced the character of evangelical Christianity ever since. This framework had two primary

elements: Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and Baconian science.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy

Although evangelicals rejected the skeptical aspects of the Enlightenment,[{19}](#) they accepted with open arms one type of Enlightenment thought known as Scottish Common Sense Realism. Common Sense philosophers believed that everyone has mental faculties that produce beliefs which we rely upon in everyday life, such as the existence of the external world, the reality of other minds, the reliability of our senses, our abilities to reason, our memories, etc. These faculties enable everyone to “grasp the basic realities of nature and morality.”[{20}](#) These beliefs weren’t considered culture-derived or culture-bound; they were the shared experience of all mankind, including the Bible writers.[{21}](#)

Historian George Marsden notes that “Common Sense had a special appeal in America because it purported to be an anti-philosophy.”[{22}](#) It pitted the common person against the speculative philosophers. Evangelicals took to it easily because of its populist appeal, because “it was so intuitive, so instinctual, so much a part of second nature.”[{23}](#) In fact, this philosophy was so widely embraced in Protestantism that, as one man said, “by most persons [Protestantism and Common Sense] are considered as necessary parts of the same system.”[{24}](#) “So basic did this reasoning become,” says Noll, “that even self-consciously orthodox evangelicals had no qualms about resting the entire edifice of the faith on the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment.”[{25}](#)

Baconian science

The other component of the framework of thought was the scientific method of Francis Bacon. Bacon advocated a rigorous empiricism, “an inductive method of discovering truth, founded upon empirical observation, analysis of observed data,

inference resulting in hypotheses, and verification of hypotheses through continued observation and experiment.”{26} The goal was “objective, disinterested, unbiased, and neutral science.”{27} George Marsden says that Scottish Common Sense philosophy provided a basis for faith in this scientific method. On the foundation of common sense we can understand the laws of nature by employing the Baconian method of examining the evidences and classifying the facts.

Evangelicals began to use this method to interpret Scripture. The Bible was seen as a collection of facts which could be understood by anyone of reasonable intelligence just by knowing what the words meant. Across the denominations, Marsden tells us, “there prevailed a faith in immutable truth seen clearly by inductive scientific reasoning in Scripture and nature alike.”{28}

Significance for Evangelicals

What was the significance of all this for evangelicals? “By and large, mid-nineteenth-century American theologians were champions of scientific reasoning and scientific advance,” says Marsden. “They had full confidence in the capacities of the scientific method for discovering truth exactly and objectively.” Conservative Christians took the scientific principles used for studying nature and applied them to the Bible. “To Protestants it seemed evident that the principle for knowing truth in one area of God’s revelation should parallel those of another area.” This broad acceptance was found across the spectrum of denominations, including Unitarians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists among others. Understanding the Bible became a matter of the commonsensical study of the facts of Scripture. The important question was, What do the words mean? Once that was determined, the Bible could be understood as clearly as could nature.{29}

Here we must pause, however, and ask an important question.

How was it that Christians who took seriously the negative effects of sin on the mind, who tended to emphasize human incapacities and a lack of confidence in human reason, could put so much confidence in a philosophy which depended so highly on reason? The answer is that American society outside the church was repudiating revelation, tradition, and social hierarchy. Baconian Common Sense thought provided a means of defending and promoting traditional values without appealing to such authorities.[\[30\]](#) The desire to make Christianity seem credible in such an environment made it easy to overlook the effects of sin on the mind.

Problems with Common Sense Thought

There were problems with Common Sense thought, however. First, Common Sense was dependent upon a belief in the commonness of our humanity, which, of course, would extend back to the Bible writers. Once the original meaning of the text was understood, the truth was settled. But this created a dilemma, for this understanding of truth as unchanging clashed with the new air of progress and change in the mid-nineteenth century. Shouldn't progress in knowledge affect our interpretation of the Bible, too? [\[31\]](#)

Second, it was supposed that philosophy and science were purely objective disciplines. As one writer notes, however, "The impediments to the use of this method are preconceptions and prejudices."[\[32\]](#) Marsden points out that "science and philosophy operate on various premises—often hidden premises. From a Christian perspective the crucial question is whether these premises reflect a strictly naturalistic outlook or one that may be shaped and guided by data derived from biblical revelation."[\[33\]](#)

It is now widely understood that the scientific method used to study both nature and Scripture isn't neutral; its use doesn't lead everyone to the same conclusions. Why? Because we filter the data through beliefs already held. Regarding the Bible, we

have to understand that it is not simply a book of facts. It is a body of inspired literature written in cultures quite different from ours. What did the authors intend us to understand? How are the various genre of Scripture to be properly interpreted? As already suggested, we have to consider also the preconceptions we bring to the text which influence and are influenced by our reading of it.

The adoption of Baconian Common Sense philosophy for the interpretation of Scripture began to cause evangelicals special problems, primarily in the area of science. The "plain, literal" reading of the text of Genesis 1 and 2 indicated a universe created in six, 24-hour days. It was easy to think, in a time when Christian beliefs were so prevalent, that an honest look at the scientific data would confirm this view. When the data seemed to show otherwise, however, evangelicals had a problem. Should they capitulate and say Genesis was myth? Should they hold fast to their interpretation regardless of the findings of scientists? Should they acknowledge a misinterpretation of the text?

The main point here isn't really the question of the age of the earth. I've used science as an example because it is often the focus of conflict between evangelicals and society. The main point is that evangelicals who based their understanding of the world on an uncritical use of a shaky method of interpretation found themselves at odds with their culture. Earlier I spoke of *biblicism*, the idea that we can only have any confidence in knowledge obtained from Scripture. Evangelicals effectively shut themselves off from any correction that might come from "the book of nature," as it has been called. They made themselves vulnerable by relying on a method which apparently failed them. Says George Marsden:

Christian apologists . . . were placing themselves in a highly vulnerable position by endorsing the Baconian ideal that the sciences should be completely neutral and freed from religious review at their starting points. . . . Almost

without warning one wall of their apologetic edifice was removed and within a generation the place of biblical authority in American intellectual life was in a complete shambles.{34}

Because of an unwillingness to allow their interpretation of Scripture to be informed from things learned from nature, evangelicals became separated from the intellectual life of the nation, and effectively removed an orthodox biblical perspective from learning in general.

Evangelicals and the “Book of Nature”

Because of the place of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, the “book of nature” typically takes a subordinate role among evangelicals. Although Scripture should remain supreme as far as our knowledge goes, some problems arise if we become too rigid in our thinking.

One problem is our response when presented with ideas we believe go against Scripture. In our desire to uphold the full truthfulness of the Bible, we reject any ideas outright which seem to contradict it. This determination creates tension in a variety of areas of learning. When people in any field of endeavor make claims we believe conflict with the Bible, we reject them. And rightly so . . . *if* such ideas really *do* conflict with Scripture. Is it Scripture they contradict, or our interpretation of it?

When ideas seem to conflict with the Bible, we need to be sure our interpretation is correct. Centuries ago Christians believed the Bible supported the view that the earth was at the center of the universe.{35} Scientific studies showed that their interpretation of Scripture was incorrect. This wasn’t a matter of choosing science over the Bible; it was a matter of allowing the study of nature to correct their wrong interpretation of it.

We hold that the Bible is true in everything it affirms. We

need to keep in mind, however, that the primary purpose of Scripture is to tell about God and His ways and will. There is truth the Bible *doesn't* tell; not truth of a redemptive sort, but truth about this world. In the Bible, one will find nothing about the cause and cure of cancer. When we prepare soldiers for duty, we give them more than what one can find in the Bible. These things are obvious, of course. But what about the possibility of learning more about God from studying the things of this earth? Even if we cannot go beyond Scriptural teaching about the nature of God (for most Protestants still reject the natural theology of the Roman Catholic Church), can we get a bigger and clearer picture of the truths of Scripture from learning about this world? From nature and from the brush of artists we can understand more fully what beauty is. From looking at a chart of the genetic structure of a DNA molecule we stand amazed at the wonder of the natural order. From the study of mankind in anthropology we see more clearly how people exhibit the knowledge of the law "written on our hearts," and how because of sin people come to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Another problem for the life of the mind with respect to the world is the view that the world really isn't very important. It's all going to burn up one day anyway, isn't it? This attitude overlooks some important facts. Scripture tells us that God created the natural order; Jesus accomplished His work of redemption within the natural order; and one day the natural order itself will be restored (cf. Gen. 1:1; Rom. 8:21; and 2 Pet. 3:13). It is God's handiwork, and it is wonderful in spite of its fallenness just for what it contains. It also is the setting within which we work out our salvation every day, and it is where we seek to reach people for Christ. The fact that the world is fallen doesn't mean there is little value in knowing it.

Secular Influences

Evangelicals not only have been influenced by the history of thought in the church over the last couple of centuries, but we're also influenced by secular thought.[{36}](#) Major secularizing social forces of the modern era such as social pluralization and the practical demands of industry significantly altered the way we think. With the rise of industry, America developed into a mobile, uprooted society, where production (and therefore efficiency) was of utmost importance. God became less relevant; to many, belief in God was a hindrance. What counted was what worked. A result of this was the privatization of belief. We either lost the nerve or simply lost interest in letting our beliefs significantly influence our daily lives.

I will forego discussion of these matters, however,[{37}](#) and briefly mention two significant philosophical influences of the twentieth century, pragmatism and existentialism.

Pragmatism

I've spoken already about the orientation of evangelicalism toward the practical. That attitude, so prevalent among most Americans, developed as a school of philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called *pragmatism*, a philosophy which exerted great influence through our schools.

Pragmatism is concerned with how an idea works out in real life. Knowing the practical consequences of an idea tells us what the concept really *means*. And verifying it in concrete ways shows its *truth*. Pragmatism is concerned with the "cash value" of an idea.[{38}](#)

Pragmatism is seen in the evangelical church when Christians see the practical application of a doctrine as the measure of its importance, and when we look with scorn on intellectualism because it's practical usefulness isn't readily apparent.

Existentialism

Another secular influence on evangelicals is the philosophy of *existentialism*.^{39} The search for truth was turned inward in the Romantic era, and, as we noted previously, subjectivism was one of the negative results of Pietism. This subjectivity is a core belief of existentialism.

The existentialist chooses for himself what his values will be and hence what he will be. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," said Jean-Paul Sartre. "That is the first principle of existentialism."^{40} Values are not imposed from the outside; they are chosen by the individual. To live by others' values is to live in bad faith.

The influence of existentialism is seen among evangelicals when we become the final authority for our values, when we insist that we are responsible for what we are to become, or when we make our own experiences determine the meaning of Scripture. The individual's experience overrides scriptural understanding and becomes authoritative over the teaching of the church past and present.

Reviving the Evangelical Mind

For all its good qualities, evangelicalism since the eighteenth century in America has not made notable contributions to the world of learning. Distinctly evangelical thinking plays little if any role in the intellectual life of our nation, and our knowledge of our own faith sometimes suffers from incorrect thinking about how to know what is true and what the Bible means.

The experiential subjectivism characteristic of extreme Pietism and of secular philosophies such as existentialism separates the individual from the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the church through the ages. It is foolish to set all that aside in favor of what each individual feels or can

figure out himself. "I feel that such-and-such" is how we often begin stating our understanding of a passage of Scripture or of a doctrine. When pressed for reasons for holding that belief, Christians will often just say, "Well, that's just what I feel it means." This kind of subjectivism makes the individual his own final authority for truth. The resulting individualism^{41} leads to a fragmentation of the church which limits it in presenting a united front in its interaction with the secular world.

Regarding the pragmatic attitude so prevalent in the church, a constant emphasis on workability inclines us away from consideration of deeper matters of the faith which can result in a grade-school level faith. Two problems come to mind. First, a pragmatic approach will never move us into a deep understanding of God. Frankly, there are things about God and His ways that may seem to have no direct practical bearing on us whatsoever. Imagine if my wife begins to tell me some story about her past, something that seems rather inconsequential, and I say, "I'm sorry, but I don't see the practical significance of that for me or for us. Let's stick to telling those things about ourselves that have practical application." That's no way to build a relationship! Someone might respond that with a little digging I might very well find a practical significance. Maybe I will, and maybe I won't. Even if I do, the effort will take me further than one will typically go who has a pragmatic attitude. Pragmatism doesn't incline one to search for meaning; mere instrumentality is usually all that is desired.

Second (building upon the first point), the issues of life are too complex for an elementary understanding of God and His ways and of this world. Hebrews 5:12 and 6:1 advise us to move on from the elementary things. This, of course, refers to biblical/theological truth. With a deeper understanding of God we can gain a better perspective on the world in which we live, and develop a greater wisdom to know how to live in it.

But we also have to understand our world well in order to be able to apply God's wisdom to it. For example, there should be expert Christian economists. Such people would understand God's view of the value of human life and productivity; they would have wisdom gained from reflection on biblical truths about such things as caring for each other, about personal responsibility, about national responsibilities, for that matter. They also would understand the way societies work and the social and political ramifications of particular ways of handling money. Clearly, workability is important here, but so are bigger issues such as the meaning of work, the responsibility of one person for another, and the care of the resources God has made available for us to make a living. A deep knowledge of God *and* of the world He created are necessary to do this.

Evangelicals can and should make significant contributions to the life of the mind in America. How can we expect to be taken seriously if the faith we confess is seen as "privately engaging, but publicly irrelevant"? Recall what Noll said: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." Some Christians would insist that evangelism is our most important work. But even upon that view, why should we expect anyone to take the message we preach seriously if we come across as backwards in our thinking? Our emphasis on the practical, and our aversion to intellectual pursuits will continue to stunt our influence in academia and in society in general.

It's possible to be both "too earthly minded to be any heavenly good," and "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." We need to be tuned in to both. In my emphasis on understanding our world, and on being aware that knowledge gained from this world can in some instances correct our interpretation of Scripture, I'm not advocating a capitulation

to the deliverances of intellectuals in any given field even if they contradict Scripture. I'm advocating a responsible use of the minds we've been given. We can engage the life of the mind, or we can continue to sink into obscurity. The first option is the more God-honoring one.

Notes

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

2. Noll, 43,44.

3. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Pietism," by M.A. Noll. Unless noted otherwise, quotations in the next few paragraphs are all from this article.

4. Noll, *Scandal*, 49.

5. Encarta Online Dictionary, <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryHome.aspx>.

6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 34.

7. Hofstadter, 154.

8. Hofstadter, 48.

9. Hofstadter, 7. For an overview of the subject of anti-intellectualism from an evangelical view, see J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in The Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 19-40.

10. Noll, *Scandal*, 12.

11. N.K. Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 2 (1973): 323; quoted

in Noll, *Scandal*, 12-13.

12. Noll, *Scandal*, 5.

13. Rick Wade, "[Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church](#)," Probe Ministries, 2001.

14. Noll, *Scandal*, 61.

15. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 63.

16. Hofstadter, 74.

17. Hofstadter, 80.

18. Hofstadter, note 8, 48-49.

19. For an introduction to the Enlightenment, see Rick Wade, "[The Enlightenment and Belief in God](#)," Probe Ministries, 2002.

20. Noll, *Scandal*, 85.

21. George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 83.

22. Marsden, 82.

23. Noll, *Scandal*, 88.

24. James Marsh, in his introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (London, 1840), 40; quoted in Marsden, 82.

25. Noll, *Scandal*, 93.

26. Dagobert Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

27. Noll, 127.

28. Marsden, 82.
29. Marsden, 80-84.
30. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 87.
31. Cf. Marsden, 91-92.
32. Runes, ed., *Dictionary*, s.v., "Bacon, Francis."
33. Marsden, 94.
34. Ibid.
35. For a brief review of this conflict, see Rick Wade, "[Modern Myths](#)," Probe Ministries, 2001. For a longer treatment online, see George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," available on the Web at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0005.html>.
36. That these two are so closely intertwined doesn't prevent us from separating them for purposes of understanding the way we think today.
37. Cf. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
38. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 160.
39. For a brief introduction to existentialism, see Rick Wade, [Worldviews, Pt. 2](#), Probe Ministries, 2000, and Todd Kappelman, [The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge](#), Probe Ministries, 1998. Note that here I am speaking of atheistic existentialism.
40. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1972), 291.

41. For a discussion of individualism, see James W. Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 75-88.

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