5 Lies the Church Tells Women

[Note: This article is taken from J. Lee Grady's book *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.* I do not subscribe to everything in this book, particularly the author's belief that there are no restrictions to women in the church. I do not agree that the office of pastor and elder are open to women, though I believe God has given many women, including me, the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (which some find easier to receive when it's called "shepherd-teacher"). At Probe, we exhort people to be discerning in what we hear and read. Mr. Grady's book is firmly in the egalitarian camp, but as a complementarian who seeks to be discerning, I can recognize the truth of some of what he says without embracing what I believe is unbiblical. Please see the end of this article for other articles on the role of women I have written for our Web site.]

In this article I look at five lies the church tells women, inspired by the book by J. Lee Grady called *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.*{1} I'm not saying all churches say all these things, but there are certain pockets of Christianity where these lies are circulated.

Lie #1: God Created Women as Inferior Beings, Destined to Serve Their Husbands.

The first lie is that God created women as inferior beings, destined to serve their husbands. Those looking for Scripture to back up their beliefs point to Genesis 2:18, where God makes a "helpmeet" for Adam. "See?" they say. "Helpers are subordinate to the ones they help, which proves women are here to serve men." This ignores the times in the Psalms (10:14, 27:9, 118:7) where God is praised as our helper, and He is certainly not inferior or subordinate to us!

Lee Grady points out, "[I]t is a cultural bias, not a spiritual or scientific principle, that women were 'made' for

the kitchen or laundry room. This is the most common form of male chauvinism, a burden placed on women by selfish men who want someone to wash their dishes."{2}

This view that women are inferior to men is not biblical, but it has infected the church from the beginning.

> *The Greek culture into which the early church was born viewed women as "half animal," unworthy of education, to be kept quiet and kept locked away, obedient to their husbands. In Jewish culture it was considered inappropriate for a man to even speak to a woman in public—including his own wife. A woman speaking to a man who was not her husband was considered to be giving evidence that she had committed adultery with him, and could be divorced. You can imagine the scandal Jesus caused when he regularly sought the company of women and talked to them, and taught them, just as he did men. Or when he allowed prostitutes to talk to him or pour perfume on his feet.{3}*

Eve was not created to be Adam's servant, but his honored and respected wife and co-regent, fashioned to rule over creation with him. We see another picture of God's intention for the first Adam and Eve in our future as the church. The bride of the Second Adam, Christ, is created and is being fashioned to reign with Him forever.{4}

Lee Grady says, "Jesus modeled a revolutionary new paradigm of empowerment by affirming women as co-heirs of God's grace."{5} Paul continued this completely new, respectful view of women by inviting women to share in the ministry of the gospel and the church, and by teaching the equality of husbands and wives in the marriage relationship (although there is a biblical distinction of roles).

When God created woman, He didn't create an inferior being, He created what He delights to call "the glory of man."(1 Cor. 11:7)

Lie #2: A Man Needs to "Cover" a Woman in Her Ministry Activities.

The second lie is that a man needs to "cover" a woman in her ministry activities. "In many cases, leaders have innocently twisted various Bible verses to suggest that a woman's public ministry can be valid only if she is properly 'covered' by a male who is present. Often women are told that they cannot even lead women's Bible studies or prayer meetings unless a pastor, deacon or some other man can provide proper oversight."{6}

One woman was told that she could not start a backyard Bible school class in her neighborhood during the summer unless her husband agreed to be present at each session and teach all the Bible lessons. Her church elders said she could plan each day's crafts and make all the snacks, but a man had to conduct the "spiritual" aspects of the outreach since he is the proper "covering."{7}

It is disturbing to think of the implication of this belief. When we, as women, use our spiritual gifts and respond to God's call to minister in various ways (within the biblical restrictions for women) without a man present, is our ministry less legitimate and valid than a man doing the same work? What if a woman with the spiritual gift of evangelism senses the Holy Spirit directing her to speak to the cashier at the gas station, and there's no man around? On a personal note, when I am speaking at one of Probe's Mind Games conferences, do my lectures lack legitimacy or truth because the male Probe staff members are busy teaching in other rooms?

Ephesians 5:21 says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Out of respect for our own weaknesses and limitations, I believe that all of us who wish to minister to others should pursue an attitude of humble submission to the body of Christ. We need to submit our beliefs and methods (and

content, if we're teaching) to trusted believers who can provide support, direction, and, if needed, correction. And anyone engaged in ministry needs prayer support, which some have called a "prayer covering;" although that is not a biblical term.

But there is no verse that says, "If a woman teaches My word, make sure a man is present so she will be covered properly." Paul's instruction that older women teach the younger women doesn't include making sure that someone with a Y chromosome is present! What underlies this erroneous idea that a man's presence somehow validates any woman's ministry is, intentional or not, a profound disrespect and distrust of women.

Lie #3: Women Can't be Fulfilled or Spiritually Effective Without a Husband or Children.

The third lie is that women can't be fulfilled or spiritually effective without a husband or children. Some churches teach that God's perfect plan for every woman is to be a wife and mother. Period. Sometimes Christian women successful in business or some other professional field are made to feel unwelcome at a church, as if they are an unhealthy influence on "purer" women.

In some places, single women are prevented from leading home fellowship groups because they're single.{8} Others have been discouraged from running for political office or pursuing a graduate education because God's plan was for them to marry and keep house—even when God hadn't brought a groom into the picture!

Lee Grady says, "We must stop placing a heavy yoke on unmarried and divorced women in the church by suggesting that they are not complete without a man in their lives or that a

husband somehow legitimizes their ministries."{9}

In some churches, women are routinely taught that the best way for them to serve God is to get married, make their husbands happy, and have children. They think this should be the sole focus of women's lives. And to be honest, when God has given a woman a husband and children, especially young children, focusing her primary energies and gifting on her family truly *is* the most important way she serves God in that season of her life. Children will not be impressed with how many Bible studies their mother teaches each week. And most husbands will be less than enthusiastic for their wives to go off on several mission trips each year when it means the home is falling apart and everybody's life is in chaos.

But women, even women with families, are given spiritual gifts that God intends for us to use to build up the body of Christ, both inside and outside our families. When we exercise those spiritual gifts and abilities, God delights to honor us with a sense of fulfillment. And usually that involves ministry in the church or in the world, as long as it's secondary to our family priorities.

But not all women are called to marriage and motherhood. It is disrespectful to single Christian women to treat them as second-class women because they don't wear a wedding ring. It's heartbreaking and frustrating when a woman would love to be married, but God hasn't brought her to the man of His choice; it just adds unnecessary sorrow for the church to say, "Sorry, honey, without a man you don't have a place here."

Lie #4: Women Should Never Work Outside the Home.

The fourth lie is that women should never work outside the home. Women who take jobs are shamed and judged, because they can't please God if they do anything outside of being a wife and mother.

This is a hurtful lie to many women who don't have a choice about working or not. There are huge numbers of divorced and widowed women in the church who would much rather stay at home with their families, but they're the only breadwinners. And for many two-parent families, they honestly can't survive on the husband's paycheck alone.

This lie comes from a misreading of Paul's exhortation in Titus 2:4 for women to be "workers at home."

Paul wasn't calling them to quit their day jobs to stay home. Women in that culture had no education and usually no opportunities for employment. He was addressing a character issue about being faithful and industrious, not lazy and self-centered. This letter was written to the pastor of a church on Crete, a society known for the laziness and self-indulgence of its people.{10}

Before the 1800's and the Industrial Revolution, both men and women worked at home, and they worked hard. Whether farming, fishing, animal husbandry, or whatever trade they engaged in, they did it from home. The care and nurture of children was woven into the day's work and extended families helped care for each other. There was no such thing, except among the very wealthy, as a woman who didn't work.

This lie completely ignores the Proverbs 31 woman, who not only took excellent care of her family, but also had several home-based businesses that required her to leave her home to engage in these businesses. I personally appreciate this biblical pattern because I had a home-based business and a ministry the entire time my children were growing, both of which took me out of the home sometimes. I was able to grow my gifts as my kids were growing, and now that they're both adults, I am able to use those gifts and abilities more fully with my new freedom to leave home.

On the other hand, an equally distressing expectation common

to younger people in today's churches is that women should always work, regardless of whether they have children or not. Our culture has so downgraded the importance of focused parenting that many people consider it wasteful for a woman to be "only" a homemaker. It's sexist to say that a woman's only valid contribution to the world or the church is to be a homemaker, but both extremes are wrong and harmful.

Lie #5: Women Must Obediently Submit to Their Husbands in All Situations.

The last lie says that women must obediently submit to their husbands in *all* situations. This lie really grieves me deeply, because it is probably responsible for more pain and abuse than any other lie we've looked at in this article.

In Ephesians 5:22, wives are commanded to submit to our husbands. For some people, this has been twisted to mean the husband is the boss and the wife's job is to obey his every whim. That is a relationship of power, not self-sacrificing love, as this marriage passage actually teaches. The wife is called to serve her husband through submission, and the husband is called to serve his wife through sacrificial love.

We have no idea how many women have been physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually abused by their husbands wielding the submission verses as a weapon. When they finally tell their pastor about their husband's rage-outs and physical assaults, they are often not believed, and sometimes they are told that if they would learn to submit the violence would stop. Then they are counseled that it would be a sin to separate and hold the husband accountable for what is a crime! Some abused women, who feared for their lives, have actually been told, "Don't worry. Even if you died you would go to be with the Lord. So you win either way. Just keep praying for him. But you are not allowed to leave."{11}

A comprehensive study on domestic violence in the church in

the mid 80's revealed that 26 percent of the pastors counseled an abused wife to keep submitting and trust that God would either stop the abuse or give her the strength to endure it. About a fourth of the pastors believed that abuse is the wife's fault because of her lack of submission! And a majority of the pastors said it is better for wives to endure violence against them than to seek a separation that might end in divorce.{12} I respectfully suggest that separation *with the goal of reconciliation* is often the only way to motivate an abusive husband to get help.{13} Just as we cast a broken limb to enable it to heal, separation is like putting a cast on a broken relationship as the first step to enable change and healing. We see in 1 Cor. 5 that God's plan for unrepentant believers is to experience the pain of isolation in separation from friends and loved ones; why would it be unthinkable for the same principle to be effective within an abusive marriage?

All the lies we've looked at in this article are the result of twisting God's word out of a misunderstanding of God's intent for His people. The way to combat the lies is to know the truth—because that's what sets us free.

Notes

1. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2000).

2. Grady, 23.

3. George Byron Koch, "Shall a Woman Keep Silent? Part 1." http://www.resurrection.org/shall_a_woman____part_1.htm.

4. Rev. 22:5, 2 Tim. 2:12.

5. Grady, 21.

6. Grady, 89-90.

7. Grady, 90.

8. Grady, 140.

9. Grady, 143.

10. “Even one of their own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'” (Titus 1:2)

11. Grady, 172.

12. Grady, 174.

13. I especially recommend Dr. Paul Hegstrom of Life Skills Learning Centers. He is a recovered abusive husband and pastor who wrote an excellent book, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse* (Beacon Hill Press, 1999). His Web site is http://www.lifeskillsintl.org.

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A Picture of Our Vulnerability

On the afternoon of Sept. 11, I was talking to a friend on the phone who said, “I’m afraid to leave my house. I’m afraid to drive down the street; I have these images of airplanes falling out of the sky and crashing into my car. I don’t feel safe anymore.” She’s not alone. People are scared and angry at feeling like they’re living in a war zone where their world could blow up at any minute. Just about the time that fears of hijacked planes slamming into buildings started to subside, new fears of anthrax have caused waves of anxious phone calls to FBI offices and police stations.

Many people resent the loss of our innocence and security, and that's completely understandable. But for the Christian, this is a poignant reminder that in actuality, we DO live in a spiritual war zone. We are in far greater danger of being attacked in spiritual warfare than we are of hijacked planes slamming into buildings. Scripture tells us we have a personal adversary who prowls around looking for whom he may devour. Satan's spiritual terrorism is every bit as real as earthly terrorism.

The president tells us to remain vigilant and alert. That's a good policy for dealing with spiritual warfare as well. We make it easy for the devil when we get lazy and complacent. Our political and philosophical enemies know how to generate "disinformation" to confuse intelligence agencies and mislead the American public. The problem is, we can't tell the difference between actual threats and false ones. Disinformation is just a fancy word for lying. And we need to be alert for the lies of our spiritual enemy as well. But in the spiritual arena, we are in a much more powerful position because we can recognize Satan's lies if we know the truth, and God has already given us all the truth we need to know in the Bible. We have to read and study God's truth in order to recognize the lies of the enemy.

God has given every believer a supernaturally powerful set of defensive and offensive weapons we can read about in Ephesians 6. We have his assurance that it's not flesh and blood enemies we fight against, but spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. And God has given us everything we need to fight back; we need not be defenseless! Most importantly, we need to remember that we have God's Spirit within us to help us fight, even when we are up to our eyeballs in the enemy's flaming darts and scud missiles.

Whether we are facing the threats of terrorists within our own country, or the threats of invisible terrorists fighting us in the spirit realm, the same comforting assurance of God's word

can help us stay secure: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.” Put on your armor, pick up your sword, and fight back!

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Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

Christ’s last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today’s church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible’s insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created

with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking "Christianese"—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, "[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation."{1}

Charles Colson writes, "We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the

very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the 'Culture war' is over and we (the church) have lost."{2}

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let's see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

> Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.{3}

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."{4} Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."{5} Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."{6}

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the "belt of truth." Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God's truth is the foundation on which the church's message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, "This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . ."{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

> If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer's conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.{10}

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is

absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.{11} 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.{12}

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."{13}

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."{14}

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, "Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true."

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband's funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.{15} 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.{16}

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no

one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.' But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, "set apart Christ as Lord." Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer's heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member's life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have." We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word "answer" in the Greek is *apologia,* which was used in connection with a formal public defense

often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.{17} We can't expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can't give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe's ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.

2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.

3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.

4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN:

Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.

6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.

7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.

8. Barna, *Boiling Point,* (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point,* 78.

11. Ibid., 80.

12. McDowell and Hostetller, 21.

13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.

14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.

15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online,* 19 April 2001, 2.

16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online,* 12 July 2000.

17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

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Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church

Rick Wade examines the nature of the gospel message as oral tradition in the early church, and the relation of that tradition with the New Testament.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Introduction: Evangelicals and Tradition

Evangelical Protestants have historically considered the Bible to be the final source for faith and practice. Church tradition plays little or no role in our lives beyond the celebration of certain holidays. In this article, I want to look at one context in which tradition was very important in the church. I'm referring to the relationship between tradition in the early church and Scripture. In this study, I'll refer often to the book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*{1} by Daniel Williams, an ordained Baptist minister teaching patristics at Loyola University.

Most of us don't realize that tradition played an important role in the establishment of our faith. We tend to see the New Testament and its development as separate from the life of the early church. In fact, if there's a dirty word in church history to evangelicals, it is "tradition." We think of tradition as something man comes up with on his own. Since what man produces is tainted, we want to keep it separate from Scripture. We don't think of the Scriptures—specifically the New Testament—as being a written form of tradition.

We need to note, however, that all tradition isn't bad. What the apostles learned from Jesus, they handed on to others

orally, and what they handed on they called “tradition.” Thus, the Gospel proclamation began as oral tradition. Recall Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” (2 Th. 3:6; see also 2:15. The NIV translates the word “tradition” as “teachings.”) The apostles taught people who taught others who taught others, and this tradition was authoritative for the church. As the tradition was being conveyed orally, it was also being written down by the apostles and sent throughout the church. As the various local churches received these writings they weighed them against what had been taught orally. Many writings were circulating at the time, some of which falsely carried the names of apostles. The major test for the authenticity of these writings was whether they accurately reflected the apostolic tradition as taught in the churches.

Losing the Past

If evangelicals attempt to study the past, it’s typically out of historical interest alone, not with a view to being taught by our forebears. While we’re doing better at crossing boundaries with our contemporaries in the church, we forget that the church extends back in time as well. We tend to isolate the church in the here and now.

How is it that we’ve become separated from our past?

Individualism

First, we’re an individualistic church. A fairly prevalent attitude in the church is that “me, my Bible, and the Holy Spirit” are all that we need to understand Christianity. In most debates today, what is the final word? “Well, it seems to me that . . .” It is considered impolite or even arrogant to

tell someone he or she is wrong, especially in the area of religion and morality. This attitude has penetrated the church as well. It is considered rude and pretentious to say that someone's understanding of something in Scripture is wrong, no matter how gently and lovingly it is said. We think, "Why should we need anyone else to tell us what the Bible means?" We have let modernistic individualism take root in our psyches to the extent that we believe we are individually the final arbiters of truth.

Some consequences of this attitude, however, are disunity in the church, and the possibility of the intrusion of false teaching as individuals attempt to understand the faith by themselves. While we certainly are responsible individually to be in the Word and seeking to understand it, we learn from a study of church history that it is the lone interpreter of Scripture who can easily go astray. Theologian Harold O. J. Brown notes that "Solitary study, cut off from the fellowship of believers seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and lacking any awareness of the faith of the church through the ages, is often a source of serious error."{2} "Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church," says Robert Webber. "It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history."{3} As Daniel Williams notes, "Protestants must reconsider the work of the Holy Spirit in the life history of the church no less than in the life of the individual believer. For it is with the church that God's new covenant was formed."{4} The Spirit is working to build the body of Christ, not just individuals. Each of us needs the church.

Anti-traditionalism

A second problem is our anti-traditional attitude. There have

been several influences on our thinking about tradition. The Enlightenment era was very significant in this regard. 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 had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today?{5} Besides, the church dominated people in the past. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.

This new attitude had an effect on the handling of Scripture. Bible scholar Christopher Hall writes, "Evangelical scholars assented to the Enlightenment's deep suspicion of tradition and proceeded to produce a traditionless hermeneutic. The 'Bible alone' survived the Enlightenment assault against tradition, but only by becoming a timeless text filled with facts to be scientifically identified, analyzed and categorized."{6} Now we were to interpret Scripture individually through a simple examination of the facts. "As [historian] Nathan Hatch observes, the Bible 'very easily became . . . 'a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.'"{7} There was no need to look to the past for help.

Thus, evangelicals came to believe that simply by using their reason under the guidance of the Spirit they could understand the Bible as it was intended. Tradition and the history of exegesis no longer mattered. For some, it was a mark of triumph to be able to say one wasn't affected by what anyone else said about the meaning of the text. Some actually believed that a *lack* of formal training was beneficial for understanding Scripture!{8} Mark Noll sees this as "bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that

casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations."{9}

The Enlightenment's anti-traditional stance was fostered to some extent by Pietism, the 19th century movement encouraging a return to Scripture and ministry by lay people. Pietism served as a corrective in a church which had given the work of the kingdom over to the professional ministers. For all the good that it wrought, however, its emphasis on the individual and his or her religious experience encouraged a focus only on the here and now. The larger church, especially the church in time past, wasn't so important.

The Free Church Tradition

Following the Reformation, the Protestant Church split into multiple denominations or traditions. Out of the Anabaptist branch grew what is called the Free Church tradition. This includes such offshoots as the Baptist, Evangelical Free, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal and Bible churches. A core belief is that "the church is not an institution on account of its structure or external rites, but exists only when it is voluntarily composed of the faithful." Williams further explains: "There is little or no sacramental attribution to any place, thing or ritual, because only the believing members of the congregation are holy by reason of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. . . . The believer is free, therefore, to follow the faith in accord with his or her conscience . . . having no other ultimate authorities than the Bible and the Holy Spirit."{10} Thus, there is a rejection of authoritative tradition of the church.

For whatever good this brought about, it also meant "The councils, the creeds, the grand theologians, the apologists, and the philosophers—all could now be abandoned." Protestants tend to look only as far back as the Reformation if they look to the past at all. What we must understand, though, is that the Reformers were trying to restore apostolic Christianity.

In their disputes with Roman Catholics, they sometimes referred to the church Fathers directly or indirectly to prove they weren't guilty of theological novelty.{11} For all their efforts to restore the church to what it should be, what followed them was a splintering "into a multitude of conflicting versions of the faith."{12} In time, that which was common to all, the tradition of the apostles, was diminished in favor of an emphasis on our differences.

This way of looking only as far back as the Reformers has produced "a huge gap in the historical consciousness of the Free church."{13} We have little sense of historical continuity with the church from the early days up to the Reformation. Williams believes we are in real danger of amnesia, of losing our roots, of forgetting who we are. "The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining 'center' of Christian belief and practice."{14}

Constantine

Occasionally one will find references to the idea of a "fall" of the church following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. Some believe that under Constantine the church began its slide into a state religion, having been corrupted by power and money. The interests of church and state overlapped, resulting in the corruption of the church. This cast a pall over the whole of church history until the Reformation. Tradition is seen as an element of the corrupted, institutionalized church.{15}

While it is true that the new freedom the church experienced under Constantine did have its negative side, it doesn't follow that the church "fell" as some say. Throughout history the church has made mistakes in its dealings with secular society and in knowing how to properly handle the freedom and power it has experienced. Some complain *today* that Christians

become too wedded to political parties, courting compromise in the process. This was no different in Constantine's day. That there was a new coloring to the church when it became established under Constantine, there is no debate. But the idea that the church quickly became corrupt, and that the councils convened during his reign were simply pawns of the emperor is simplistic. The church continued to be faithful to the task of clarifying and passing on the apostolic tradition. "The faith professed and practiced in the early churches was not determined by the political machinations of emperors and episcopal hierarchies," says Williams. "The essential formulation and construction of the Christian identity was something that the fourth century *received* and continued to expand upon through its biblical exegesis and liturgical life as reflected in the credal Tradition."{16}

Consider what came out of the period of Constantine's reign. Says Williams:

> *I am claiming the late patristic period functioned as a kind of doctrinal canon by which all subsequent developments of theology were measured up to the present day. The great creeds of the period, the development of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the finalization of the biblical canon, doctrines pertaining to the human soul and being made in the image of God, to the fall and redemption, to justification by faith, and so on, find their first and (in many cases) enduring foothold in this period. All theological steps later taken, in confirmation or denial, will begin on the trail marked by the early Fathers. . . . The theology that developed after Constantine was not a movement radically subversive to Scripture and to the apostolic faith. On the contrary, the major creeds and doctrinal deliberations were a conscious extension of the earlier Tradition and teaching of the New Testament while attempting, in light new challenges, to articulate a Christian understanding of God and salvation.{17}*

The reason this is significant for our study is that some have let the idea that the church fell in the late patristic era cause them to discount the entire era. This is a mistake. There was good and bad for the church under Constantine's reign. Nonetheless, the church continued to develop in its understanding of the apostolic Tradition. We shouldn't ignore the early church because of occasional failings.

Tradition and Roman Catholicism

Because we so often associate tradition with the Catholic Church, it is very likely that the reader is wondering how this understanding of tradition differs from that taught by the Roman Church. Before beginning our look at tradition, then, let's distinguish what we're talking about from that which is held by the Roman Church.

In the first few centuries after Christ, oral and written tradition was thought of as being the same thing. The "canon" was acknowledged in either form. By the 4th and 5th centuries tradition and Scripture were distinguished more carefully, but still were seen as being of one piece. In the 14th century, however, tradition became a separate *source* of truth when it was realized that some traditions couldn't be proved from Scripture.{18} There were now, then, *two* sources of revelation—Scripture and Church—tradition, rather than *one* source in two forms. What the Reformers wanted to do was not to pit Scripture against tradition *per se* and throw out the latter. They wanted to let go of man-made traditions and go back to the true apostolic tradition. "The sixteenth-century Reformers were cognizant of this distinction and highly valued the Tradition located in the Fathers as a means of interpreting biblical truth. . . . The Reformation was not about Scripture versus tradition but about reclaiming the ancient Tradition against distortions of that Tradition, or what eventually became a conflict of Tradition versus traditions."{19} They wanted to avoid citing the church

fathers as authorities for doctrines or practices, which were incongruent with Scripture. They rejected the idea that the ancient Tradition had become secondary to the traditions of medieval Catholicism. Tradition with a small "t" had begun to interpret Tradition with a capital "T"; the Reformers thus emphasized Scripture as delivering true apostolic Tradition to argue against Rome's claim to authority.

While some branches of the Reformation retained some of the old traditions, others didn't. The former wanted to be sure Scripture didn't *oppose* them; the latter wanted to know if a tradition or belief was actually *taught* in Scripture. Man-devised traditions were to be set aside. This is the more dominant approach taken by the Free Church tradition.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on Scripture along with a suspicion of traditions in general worked together to produce an anti-traditional attitude that was unnecessary, and which has cut-off much of the church's past from Christians today.

Apostolic Tradition

Tradition and Traditionalism

The Greek word that is translated *tradition (paradosis)* "means a transmission from one party to another, an exchange of some sort, implying living subjects." It involves the idea of receiving and passing on. Williams notes that tradition is "not something *dead* handed *down,* but *living* being *handed over*."{20} It is as much a noun as a verb, meaning "that which is handed over" as well as "the process of handing it over."

Note, too, that tradition isn't necessarily something old. As one scholar writes, "The scriptural use of the term *tradition* has nothing to do with oldness or with a practice or beliefs being time-honored. A tradition, in the strict sense of the word, becomes tradition the instant it is handed over."{21}

This kind of tradition isn't to be confused with "traditionalism," which refers to faith in tradition *per se*. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan contrasts the two this way: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."{22}

We often think of traditions as being *practices,* such as decorating a church a certain way during certain seasons, or conducting worship services certain ways. But traditions can be teachings—beliefs passed from one person to another. Paul referred to his teachings as traditions. He exhorts the Thessalonians: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6, *NASB*. The *NIV* translates the word "tradition" as "teaching.") Paul's job was to pass on what he had been taught so those who heard could pass it on themselves. This idea is expressed clearly in his letter to Timothy, where he said, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Tim 2:2)

Someone might object, pointing out that Jesus speaks only negatively about tradition. "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men," He says. (Mark 7:8) But notice: Jesus is chastising the Pharisees, not for holding to traditions *per se*, but for letting the traditions of *men* trump the things of God.

Apostolic Tradition

The traditions that Paul passed on included three parts: the *kerygmatic* part, which was the core teaching of Christ (e.g., I Cor. 15); the *ecclesiastical* part, which dealt with matters of practice in the church (e.g., I Cor. 11); and the *ethical* part, which taught people how to live upright lives (e.g., II Thess. 3:6). Together, all this was simply called the

Tradition (Williams and others capitalize the word to distinguish it from the individual traditions of churches that often distinguish them.{23}). “The Tradition indicates the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly.”{24}

The Tradition, then, was the substance of the Gospel message passed on from one person to the next. “Tradition was an expression of the original apostolic preaching,” says Daniel Williams. It was not “an extracanonical source of revelation . . . but a summary of the essential content of faith to which the Scripture, Old and New Testaments, testifies.”{25}

Apostolic Tradition was transmitted through “baptismal professions, credal-like formulas, and hymns. Such vehicles were the primary means by which Christian teaching and spirituality was conveyed to believers.”{26} The Tradition was also conveyed to the church in the writings that make up our New Testament. These, of course, were not an afterthought; they provided a fixed source of truth for God’s people and eventually became the church’s ultimate authority.

The Rule of Faith

The doctrinal core of the Tradition came to be known as the Rule of Faith. This was the “summary of the main points of Christian teaching.” It referred “to the apostolic preaching that served as the norm of Christian faith.”{27} “Those elements of what the church believed (*fides quae creditur*), a kind of ‘mere Christianity,'” says Williams, “are discovered in the *regula fidei* or Rule of faith.”{28} The Rule was widely recognized by middle to late second century, and universally recognized by the early third century.{29}

Although there was no set form for the Rule of Faith, which makes it distinct from creeds, “the essential message,” says Everett Ferguson, “was fixed by the facts of the gospel and

the structure of Christian belief in one God, reception of salvation in Christ, and experience of the Holy Spirit; but each teacher had his own way of stating or elaborating these points."{30}

Here is perhaps the fullest expression of the Rule, found in the writings of Tertullian.

> *Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.{31}*

The Rule of Faith served a few important functions. It provided a summary of the faith for new converts preparing for baptism.{32} It also was used to counter the heresies such as those of the Marcionites and the gnostics. Marcion's

understanding of Paul's doctrine of grace hindered him from accepting the Old Testament God as the Father of Jesus. This rejection was reflected in his treatment of the New Testament. He only accepted Luke and Paul's writings, and altered even those to suit his beliefs. Marcion believed that only those would be saved who accepted his teachings. Gnostic beliefs, which had to be answered, were that Jesus hadn't come in the flesh, or that the Christ had simply borrowed the human body of Jesus in the incarnation. Salvation was obtained by obtaining certain secret knowledge. The Rule was used as a response to such beliefs. It stood as a known oral tradition against the gnostics' secret traditions.

Since even these opponents of apostolic Christianity appealed to the Bible for support, appeal was made to the Rule of Faith for the proper interpretation of authentic Scripture. Says William DiPuccio,

> *The Rule served as a canon within a canon, enabling the Fathers to ascertain the correct interpretation of the Bible in fundamental matters of faith, and as a yardstick for measuring the canonicity of a particular writing. . . . The Rule was regarded, then, as the lens or reference grid through which the Scriptures were interpreted. Clement of Alexandria makes this distinction when he declares that the first principle of his system is the Scriptures as they are rightly interpreted through the church's Rule of Faith.{33}*

As a canon of interpretation, it served as the "plumbline of the truth." Without such a plumbline, "scriptural exegesis is left to the discretion of the individual interpreter or school of interpretation."{34}

Scripture, Tradition, and the Church

In the evangelical church, Scripture and tradition are typically set in opposition to one another. But in the early

church the two worked together as two forms of the same message. As one writer notes, “It is not a question of whether Scripture *or* tradition has the primacy; nor is it even a question of Scripture *and* tradition; rather, it is more properly a question of *scriptural tradition*.”{35}

At first, it was the oral Tradition or teachings of the apostles which was authoritative in the churches, because that was what people received. As the apostles’ writings became available, they were accepted as authoritative because they were recognized as mirroring the Rule of Faith.{36} In the early church, Scripture and the Rule were never placed in opposition to one another; they taught the same thing.{37} These three—Scripture, Tradition, and the church—were considered one collective source for the truth of Christ. The Bible was to be interpreted by the church in keeping with the Tradition.{38} “Dividing Scripture from the Tradition or from the church,” says Williams, “creates an artificial distinction which would have been completely alien to the earliest generations of Christians.”{39}

It’s important to note, too, that the Tradition was never held above Scripture.{40} The two worked together. “The Rule, then, is co-extensive with the Bible, but it is not above it,” says William DiPuccio. “It provides the *optics* we need to bring the Bible into focus.”{41}

One might ask, however, why the Rule *itself* was accepted as authoritative in the early church. Wouldn’t oral tradition by its nature be subject to contamination? What guaranteed it was *apostolic succession*. “Setting aside later alterations and/or distortions of this idea,” DiPuccio says, “the original concept of apostolic succession (which included deacons or presbyters as well as bishops) was not so much a succession of ordination, as a succession of living *faith and truth* as these are embodied in the Scriptures and the ancient Rule of Faith.”{42} Everett Ferguson gives us the thinking of Irenaeus on the matter:

> *A person could go to the churches founded by the apostles . . . and determine what was taught in those churches by the succession of teachers since the days of the apostles. In other words, the apostles taught those they ordained to lead the churches, and then these passed on to others what they had been taught. The constancy of this teaching was guaranteed by its public nature; a change could have been detected, since the teaching was open. The accuracy of the teaching in each church was confirmed by its agreement with what was taught in other churches. One and the same faith had been taught in all the churches since the time of the apostles.{43}*

Significance of the Tradition for Today

Does this issue carry any significance beyond historical information? Should the Rule of Faith have any meaning for us today? I think it does. First, it opens to us the teachings of the church fathers, providing a wonderful resource for understanding our faith. Once we recognize that the church didn't fall so precipitously in the patristic era and following, we can look to the church of earlier times for understanding and inspiration.

Second, by looking at the core message taught in the early church we can be reminded of the central truths of Christianity, which will give us a basis for evaluating doctrinal teachings today. Paul warned Timothy of the destruction caused by false teachings, and encouraged him to remember his teaching and to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." (II Tim. 3:14) What Prof. Christopher Hall says makes sense: "The hermeneutical and historical proximity of the fathers to the New Testament church and its apostolic tradition demands that we listen carefully to their exegetical insights, advice and intuitions."{44}

Third, by seeing what is most important we can work to correct the disunity in the church. Think about what separates Christians in America. Right now worship style is a major issue. Ideas about end times and modes of baptism are two other divisive issues. When we think about our differences, however, do we stop to think about our similarities? Do we even *know* what people of other Christian traditions believe? We shouldn't minimize significant differences between churches. But by keeping our lines so carefully drawn, are we dishonoring our Lord who prayed for unity among His people? (Jn. 17:20-23) Maybe a look back will remind us of what is most important and around which we can unite. We can begin to break down the walls constructed by our differences over matters which aren't so clear or which aren't as important as the central truths. Without taking hold of the Tradition flowing from the apostles into and through the early church, Williams believes we will see an increasing sectarianism "characterized by an ahistoricism and spiritual subjectivism," and we will be more susceptible to accommodation to the world.{45}

Fourth, we can be re-connected with the church of the past. Simply knowing about the history of the church gives us a sense of being part of something big; something that stretches beyond the world we see. It lifts us out of our provincialism, thus expanding our understanding of God and His ways with His church.

Finally, we will see even more clearly how down to earth our faith is. We can see how it moved with the ebb and flow of real life as regular people (like you and me) did their best amid trying circumstances to understand and live out the faith.

Conclusion

By reopening the church's past we will find a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom which can serve us well today. By

learning about the early church and church fathers one will be both encouraged and challenged. Both are important for a vital faith.

There are a number of resources available for those who are interested in probing the minds of those who have gone before us. Daniel Williams' *Retrieving the Tradition,* Christopher Hall's *Reading the Scripture With the Church Fathers*, or Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*{46} are excellent places to start.

Notes

1. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition, and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
2. Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition" in James S. Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 80.
3. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 128. See also Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation," 80.
4. Williams, 18.
5. Cf. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 24.
6. Hall, 25.
7. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Hall, 25.
8. Hall, 25-26. Cf. Williams, 22.
9. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 127, quoted in Hall, 26.
10. Williams, 2-3.
11. Williams, chap. 6, 173ff.

12. A. J. Conyers, “Protestant Principle, Catholic Substance,” *First Things* 67 (November 1996): 17, quoted in Williams, 15.
13. Williams, 5.
14. Williams, 13.
15. Williams deals with this at length in *Retrieving the Tradition*, especially pp. 101-131.
16. Williams, 130.
17. Williams, 139.
18. Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. “Tradition” by J. Van Engen. See also Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 96.
19. Williams, 175.
20. Williams, 35.
21. Father Andrew, “A Response to Harold O.J. Brown” in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 201, n. 2.
22. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, “The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition” (100-600), (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 9.
23. Williams, 36.
24. Williams, 6.
25. Williams, 97.
26. Williams, 68-69.
27. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), s.v. “Rule of Faith,” by Ferguson, 1003.
28. Williams, 92.
29. William DiPuccio, (1995). “Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and the Rule of Faith: An Ancient Key to a Modern Question,” *Premise II* (9), 5ff. capo.org/premise/95/oct/p950905.html.
30. Ferguson, “Rule of Faith,” 1004.
31. Tertullian, “The Prescription Against Heretics” Chap. 13, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3, 448-449, The AGES Digital Library Collections.
32. Ferguson, “Rule,” 1004.
33. DiPuccio. See also Williams, 97-98.

34. Williams, 99.
35. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 19990, s.v. "Tradition," by Donald F. Winslow, 908, quoted in DiPuccio. One can see the organic unity of the oral and written traditions by noting that both were called canon, first the Tradition, and later the Scriptures. Cf. R.P.C. *Hanson, Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 78-79, and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1988), 77.
36. Williams, 45.
37. "Tertullian clearly states that the Rule is identical to Scripture in content, though not in form." DiPuccio.
38. Williams, 97-98. See also DiPuccio.
39. Williams, 14.
40. Williams, 96-97.
41. DiPuccio.
42. DiPuccio.
43. DiPuccio.
44. Hall, 196.
45. Williams, 14.
46. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. This is a reworking of his earlier Common Roots cited above.

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The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

Don Closson looks at the threat materialism poses to the church and proposes ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

One of the most popular rock songs of the seventies begins

with the lyrics, “There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold and she’s buying a stairway to heaven.” The words, written by Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones of the group Led Zeppelin, reflects the fashionable message of anti-materialism that pervaded much of rock music in the late sixties and seventies. The notion of dropping out of the rat race and rejecting the corporate mentality of one’s parents formed the foundation of many a rock musician’s career. Today, one often hears people refer to the entire decade of the eighties as the “me decade” as if during that period of time Americans were somehow more self- centered and money hungry than during any that came before it. One popular newspaper framed the mindset with a poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub is watertight
That racquetball won’t get too tough
That all my sushi’s fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won’t lose its perks
My microwave won’t radiate
My condo won’t depreciate
I pray my health club doesn’t close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won’t take.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus’ life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for money and things. He pleads with us to go beyond concerns for what we will consume and to seek our creator and

His will. In Matthew 6:24-25 Jesus taught that "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"

In spite of the fact that materialism is apparently held in low regard by large segments of both popular and religious culture, surveys indicate that it influences the thinking of many Americans. In a recent survey, George Barna found that seventy-two percent of Americans believed that people are blessed by God so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, and fifty-eight percent agreed with the statement that the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment. Eighty-one percent believed that God helps those who help themselves. These responses point to the validity of what has been called our "therapeutic culture." The first commandment of this culture appears to be *do whatever makes you feel good, whatever helps you to cope materially.* When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment He responded by saying we are to love God (not things) with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:30, 31). That kind of love is self-denying and sacrificial.

In this article, I will look at the threat materialism poses to the church and propose ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

In his book *The Gospel and the American Dream*, Bruce Shelley tells the true story of a man who boasted to others that he would be a millionaire by age thirty-five. This young man was known as a really nice guy with a good sense of humor. He was considered bright, thoughtful, and generous to a fault. In

1984 he had acquired many of the appearances of success. He was flying to Dallas from Phoenix weekly on business. He drove a nice company car, and had moved his family into an exclusive neighborhood. He was also doing all the things that wealthy young men should do. He was the program chairman of the local Lions Club, president of the 200-member Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and a board member for the local Boys Club. However, on a Sunday in May 1985, the family missed church for the first time in months. The aspiring millionaire spent the day struggling in vain to scrape together enough cash to salvage his business, his image, and his pride. At 11:30 that night, after the family went to bed, he laid out his insurance policies and then went into the garage. He got into his expensive, company-provided BMW and turned on the ignition. He was dead within minutes.

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man’s real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

The two lives described here depict two different faith systems. The millionaire, claiming to have faith in the God of the Bible, ultimately had placed his faith in things. When he was in danger of losing them, he gave up on life itself. My friend who is renovating the old house is just about out of money. However, he is optimistic and excited about the ministry he is having in the lives of the students living there. He is aware of the financial difficulties that his dream presents, but he is trusting in God to provide even when good business sense may argue against it.

Could it be that many Christians have succumbed to the notion of rugged individualism, placing the building of an earthly empire above the building of God's kingdom? James 5:1-3 holds a severe warning for those tempted by wealth. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." God warns believers against placing their faith in things and treating people as expendable commodities.

The Sources of Materialism

In spite of both secular and religious messages against materialism in our culture, it still seems to have a great deal of influence on the lives of typical Americans. Why is this? I propose that there are two sources of materialism: philosophical materialism and functional materialism.

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think."{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this

position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, “We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.”{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

Survey after survey reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe that a God exists. If most Americans believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do they act like functional materialists? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? We could blame our modern society. The triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic components, often leaves little room for behavior motivated by a spiritual reality. However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

Every believer experiences a battle between the spirit and the flesh. In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Further, he warns the Galatians that people whose lives are filled with selfish ambition and envy, among other things, will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is not saying that one will lose his or her salvation, but that a life consumed by materialistic

desires is probably devoid of a spiritual dimension. If the Holy Spirit is not evident, there is no regeneration and no salvation.

Jesus' ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of His ministry is highlighted by His experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt Him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the church, it is significant that at the beginning of Jesus' short ministry He was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word *tempt* to mean "to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness."{4} Jesus' fasting in the desert provides His followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It also provides a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan's testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

Satan's temptation is to reduce human nature to what might be

called the *will to pleasure* principal, the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'” (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the *will to pleasure* view of human nature with a *will to meaning* view. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive. In his personal struggle to survive a Nazi concentration camp, the psychologist Victor Frankl discovered that when men lost meaning they quickly died. Mankind needs a transcendent reason to continue striving against the struggles that life presents. It is the Word of God that provides the only true foundation for this struggle.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for *instant status*. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but He would lose His integrity. Jesus responds by declaring that we are not to put God to the test. We are not to presume that God will accept our plans with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus’ goal is to be the king of the Jews, why not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'” (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than

pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

A Cuban pastor recently attended a conference in Dallas and noticed how people here often say that they have no time. He said that people in Cuba have relatively few things but rarely run out of time. This brings to mind the idea of opportunity cost. This rule from economics tells us that if we spend our resources on one thing we cannot use them on another. If our focus is on things, and our time is spent buying, using, fixing, and replacing them, do we really have time to build the relationships with people necessary to communicating the Gospel?

In his book *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Dr. Gene Getz suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for believers to be in bondage to things; we cannot serve both things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and the book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians also have to constantly be on guard against self-deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the church at Laodicea imagined itself self-

sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

How then do Christians avoid materialism? The apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God’s kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples not to be absorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:34).

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God’s will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, “all the believers were one in heart and mind”(Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God’s kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God for the same today?

Notes

1. Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan: New York).
2. Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 61.

3. Israel Shenker, “The provocative progress of a pilgrim polymath,” *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 128.
4. Graham H. Twelftree, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 821.>

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Modern Myths

Myths and Modern Myths

Have you ever heard someone describe the Bible as *myth*? All those supernatural occurrences couldn’t possibly have taken place, it is said. It’s a good story, intended to help people lead a good life and perhaps get closer to God (if there is one), but not to be taken literally.

What is a *myth*? A myth is a story that serves to provide meaning and structure for life. It *might* have some history behind it, but that isn’t important. It is the ideas that count. Myths are intended to translate the supposed abstract realities of the world in concrete, story form.

Myths were important to the ancient Greeks for defining who they were and what the world was like. In modern times, however, we try to de-emphasize the significance of myths for a culture; we equate *myth* with *fiction*, and fiction isn’t to be taken seriously.

In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*,{1} Philip Sampson debunks the notion that we’ve given up myths, even in the arena of science! According to Sampson there are a number of myths that have become

significant for our culture even though they are false—or at least misleading—with respect to the facts. In this book, Sampson gives the true stories behind some of the myths our culture holds as true, such as the idea that Galileo's fight with the church provides a good example of the supposed warfare between science and religion.

Myths such as these serve to perpetuate certain notions their promoters want us to believe. They can develop over time with no conscious aim, or they can be knowingly advanced for the good of a certain cause. So, as with the Galileo story, if one wishes to advance the notion that there is a tension between Christianity and science, with science being clearly in the right, one might employ a story which pits the knowledgeable, good scientist just out to present facts against the hierarchy of a church which seeks to keep people in darkness so as to advance its own cause.

In ancient Greece, myths weren't told as though they were historically true. In our society, however, facts are important, so myths are told as if they are scientifically or historically accurate. Thus, with the Galileo story, there is enough history to seem to give it a factual basis—although significant facts are left out!

In this article we will look at three of these modern myths: Galileo and the church, the purported oppression of people by missionaries, and the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Galileo and the Church

One myth that is deeply ingrained in our culture is that of the supposed "warfare between science and religion." Science deals with fact; religion deals with nice stories, at best. Whenever there is a conflict, obviously science wins the day. This myth goes deeper than just who has the best interpretation of the data. It's as if there is, *of necessity,*

a conflict between the two, and religion has to be shown to be inferior to science.

One story that seems to serve this myth especially well is the story of Galileo. You've probably heard about Galileo's celebrated battle with the church over his views on the nature of the universe. As the story is typically told, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo, who agreed that the earth was not the center of the universe after all, then developed his work. Supposedly the church wanted to keep man at the center of God's creation and thus as the supreme part of the created order. To move earth out of the center was to somehow lower man. Thus, the church persecuted Galileo and eventually silenced him, showing its raw power over society.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Galileo was a martyr, and his persecutors incorrigible ignoramuses."{2} Says writer Patrick Moore, "The Roman Catholic Church attacked Galileo because the [heliocentric] theory was not reconcilable with certain passages of the Bible. As a consequence, poor Galileo spent most of his life in open conflict with the Church."{3} However, reason ultimately prevailed and science won the day over religious obscurantism.

The problem with this story is that it ranges from the true to the distorted to the blatantly untrue! Galileo's primary trouble was with *secular scientists*, not with the church. It was when he began reinterpreting Scripture to promote his cause and publicly ridiculed the pope that he got into big trouble.

"The Galileo story was developed by French Enlightenment thinkers as part of their anticlerical program," says Philip Sampson, "but by the late nineteenth century it had created a language of warfare between science and religion." Science became the fount of reasoned knowledge, and religion was "reduced to ignorance and dogma."{4} To accomplish this,

however, history had to be distorted.

Let's see what really happened with Galileo. It needs to be noted up front that in Galileo's day the theories of scientists were not thought to give an actual account of the way the heavens worked; they simply provided models for ordering the data. They "were regarded as the play things of virtuosi," as George Sim Johnston put it.{5} "To the Greek and medieval mind, science was a kind of formalism, a means of coordinating data, which had no bearing on the ultimate reality of things."{6}

The fact is that the church didn't *care* all that much about what Copernicus and Galileo thought about the order of the universe, scientifically speaking. Copernicus' book on the subject circulated for seventy years without any trouble at all. It was the *scientists* of the day who opposed the theory, because it went against the received wisdom of Aristotle. Copernicus believed that his theory actually described the universe the way it was, and this was unacceptable to the academics. When Galileo published his ideas, it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

According to Aristotle, the earth was at the center of the universe, and all the rest of the universe was situated in concentric spheres around it. From the moon out, all was thought to be perfect and unchanging. The earth, however, was obviously changing and thus imperfect. All matter in the universe was thought to fall downward toward the center of the earth. The earth is therefore like the trash bin of the universe; it was no compliment to man to emphasize his place on earth. In other words, to be at the center of the universe was *not* a good thing!

To now say that the earth was out with other planets where things had to be perfect was to seriously undercut Aristotle's ideas. So when Galileo published his notions it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

It's true that Galileo got into hot water with the church, but it was *not* because his theory moved man physically from the center of the universe; that was a *good* thing, given Aristotle's views. Man was already considered small in the universe. Most people already believed that the earth was created for God, not for man. "The doctrine that the earth exists for man's use," says Philip Sampson, "derives from Greek philosophy, not the Bible."{7} Thus, the Copernican theory "ennobled" the status of the earth by making it a planet. So the church in general didn't see the heliocentric theory as a demotion.

The fact is that Galileo was on good terms with the church for a long time, even while advancing his theory. He made sure that the idea he was attacking of the incorruptibility of the universe with its perfect heavens and imperfect earth was an Aristotelian belief and not a doctrine of the church. "Indeed," says Sampson, "the church largely accepted his conclusions, although the die-hard Aristotelians in the universities did not. . . . Far from being constantly harried by obscurantist priests, he was feted by cardinals, received by Pope Paul V and befriended by the future Pope Urban VIII."{8} As historian George Santillana wrote in 1958, "It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular circles."{9} He wasn't afraid of the church; he feared the ridicule of his fellow scientists!

What *did* get Galileo in trouble with the church were two things. First, because the church had historically followed Aristotle (as did secularists) in interpreting scientific data, it wanted hard evidence to support Galileo's views, which he did not have. For Galileo to insist that his theory was true to the way things really were was to step outside proper scientific boundaries. He simply didn't have enough hard data to make such a claim. The problem, then, wasn't

between religion and science, but between methods of interpreting the data. But this, in itself, wasn't enough to bring the church down on him.

The bigger problem was Galileo's manner of promoting his beliefs. To do so, he reinterpreted Scripture in contradiction to traditional understandings, which ran counter to the dictates of the Council of Trent. Perhaps even worse was his mockery of the pope. His treatise, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems,* took the form of a debate. The character that took Aristotle's view against the heliocentric theory was called Simplicio. His "role in the dialogue is to be a kind of Aunt Sally to be knocked down by Galileo. . . .Galileo puts into Simplicio's mouth a favorite argument used by his friend Pope Urban VIII and then mocks it. In other words, he concluded his treatise by effectively calling the very pope who had befriended him a simpleton for not agreeing with Galileo. This was not a wise move," says Sampson, "and the rest is history."{10} In fact, Galileo himself believed that the major cause of his trouble was the charge that he had made fun of the pope, *not* that he thought the earth moved.

So the condemnation of Galileo did *not* result from some basic conflict between science and religion. It "was the result of the complex interplay of untoward political circumstances, political ambitions, and wounded prides."{11} However, the myth continues to bolster the status of secular, naturalistic thought by making religion look bad.

So is there warfare between science and religion? Hardly. This is really warfare between worldviews.

The Missionaries

A favorite charge against Christians for many years is the belief that missionaries effectively destroyed other cultures: running roughshod over the natives' beliefs and culture. Like the myth of the warfare between science and religion, the myth

of the oppressive missionary provides a vehicle for exalting secularism while denigrating Christianity. According to this myth, the Christian missionary arrogantly strips natives of their own culture and forces western Christian culture on them, even to the point of oppression and exploitation.

Secular literature often leaves one with an impression of missionaries as stern, joyless oppressors who took advantage of innocent natives in order to advance their own ends. They forced their art and music on other cultures, made the people learn the missionaries' language, and manipulated them to wear western clothing. "Missionaries are accused of exploiting natives for commercial gain," says Sampson, "colluding with expansionist colonialism and even committing 'ethnocide.' They are implicated in the theft of land, the forced removal of children from their parents, the destruction of habitats, torture, murder, the decline of whole populations into destitution, alcoholism, and prostitution. Even when they provide disaster relief, they are guilty of 'buying' converts."{12} There are no "half tones," says Sampson. Missionaries "impose rigid, joyless, and patriarchal rules" on natives who are "portrayed as residents in an idyllic land, the victims of the full might of Western oppression incarnate in the person of 'the missionary.'"{13}

One of the problems in this assessment is the ready identification of missionary activity with that of western colonialism and trade. While missionaries often *did* import their culture along with the Gospel, they were not, for the most part, interested in taking over other peoples. Colonialists, however, were. It was "the Enlightenment visions of 'civilization' and 'progress' that inspired colonial activity from the eighteenth century and rejected faith in God for faith in reason." Colonialists had no qualms about attempting to "civilize" the "barbarians" and "savages." *Civilized* was a term which "had 'behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on secular and

progressive human self-development.'" Traders, also, were guilty of exploiting other peoples for their own profit. Consider the power of commercial enterprises such as the search for gold by the conquistadors and the activity of such organizations as the British South Africa Company that brought exploitation.{14}

What this reveals is the role of *modernism* in the oppression and exploitation of native peoples. Romanticism established the image of the "noble savage," the pure, pristine individual who, living close to nature, had not been corrupted by the influences of civilization. The fact is that some native peoples were given to human sacrifice and cannibalism, among other vices. However, the myth of the noble savage took root in western thinking. Then Darwin taught that there were weaker races that were doomed to extinction by the unstoppable forces of evolutionary change (new ideas about eugenics grew out of this thinking). These two images—the noble savage and the weaker race—combined to paint a picture of vulnerable nobility. According to the myth, Christian missionaries were guilty of taking advantage of this vulnerability to advance their own causes. The reality was that it was often *colonialists* who exploited these people, and salved their consciences by picturing the people as doomed to extinction anyway.

By contrast, what one finds in the literature about missionary activities includes occasions where they stood against the colonial and trading powers. The Dominican bishop Bartolomè opposed slavery in the sixteenth century. John Philip of the London Missionary Society supported native rights in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Lancelot Threlkeld demanded "equal protection under the law for the Awabakal people of Australia."{15} John Eliot stood up for the Indians in Massachusetts' courts against unjust settler claims. Even one critic of missionary activity conceded that evangelical missions in Latin America "tended to treat native people with

more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens."{16} Missionaries taught people to read their own languages, good hygiene to indigenous groups, farming skills, and even brought medical help. In some regards, the missionaries *did* try to change other cultures, and sometimes illegitimately. But sometimes that isn't wrong; there should be no apologies for trying to stop such practices as human sacrifice and cannibalism. Compare the efforts of contemporary secularists to end female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes.

Scholars have known for many years that the identification of missions with oppression is unfair, yet the myth continues to be told. It simply isn't true that missionaries were responsible for the destruction of native cultures. But the myth persists, for "it provides the modern mind with an alibi for its own complicity in oppression."{17}

The Witch Trials

Some critics like to portray the Christian Church as the great persecutor of the weak and helpless. A popular vehicle for this myth is the story of the witch trials in Europe and America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Sampson says that this story "relates that many millions of women throughout Europe, mainly the elderly, poor and isolated, were tortured by the church into confessing nonexistent crimes before being burnt to death."{18} The story of the witch trials provides a handy illustration for the myth that that the church actively persecutes those who aren't in agreement. "The history of Christianity is the history of persecution," said one writer,{19} and this is seen in no bolder outline than in the story of the witch-hunts. Furthermore, this story provides a good example of the supposed women-hating attitude of the church since the vast majority of witches tried were women.

There is no denying that Christians were involved in the trial

and execution of witches. But to paint this issue as simply a matter of the powerful church against the weakest members of society is to distort what really happened.

Before considering a couple of facts about the trials, the bias of the critics who write about them should be noted. For most, there simply is no such thing as a supernatural witch, meaning one who can actually draw on satanic power to manipulate nature. If this is true, it *must* be the case that there is some natural explanation for the strange behavior of those charged with witchcraft, and the church was completely unjustified in prosecuting them. But this is a naturalistic bias; it ignores the fact that "most people of the world throughout most of its history have taken supernatural witchcraft to be real."{20} Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris, "the prejudice of 'indignant rationalists' [who were] more concerned to castigate the witch-baiters for their credulity and cruelty than to understand what the phenomenon was all about."{21} It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of "Enlightenment overcoming superstition."{22}

This leads us to ask who and why these charges of witchcraft were brought in the first place. What we find is that this "was not principally a church matter, nor was the Inquisition the prime mover in the prosecution of witches," as is often thought. It was ordinary lay people who typically brought charges of witchcraft, and mostly women at that!{23} The primary reasons were not bizarre supernatural behavior or heretical beliefs, but the tensions brought about by a loss of crops or the failure of bread to rise. "People commonly appealed to magic and witchcraft to explain tragedies and misfortunes, or more generally to gain power over neighbors."{24} Even kings and queens saw witchcraft as a very real threat to their thrones and well-being. The Inquisition

actually supplied a tempering influence. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said, “In general, the established church was opposed to the persecution” of witches.{25} Likewise, the Protestant churches were not the real aggressors in the witch trials. John Calvin believed that witchcraft was a delusion, the cure for which was the Gospel, not execution.{26}

Estimates of executions in the millions are grossly exaggerated. Recent studies estimate about 150300 per year, making a total of between 40,000 and 100,000 who were executed over a period of 300 years. While “this is an appalling enough catalog of human suffering,” as Sampson says,{27} it pales in comparison to the slaughter of innocent people in the 20th century, resulting from the excesses of modernistic thinking. “Genocide is an invention of the modern world,” says one writer.{28} Compare the numbers slaughtered under Nazism or Stalinism to that of the witch trials. If the witch trials demonstrate the danger of religion to society, the slaughters under Hitler and Stalin demonstrate the much greater danger of irreligion.

Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris. It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”{29}

Conclusion

From the days of the early church we have been called upon to defend not only our beliefs but also the *activities* of individual Christians and the church as a whole. In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization,* Philip Sampson has given us a tool to better enable us to do that today. I encourage you to read it.

Notes

1. Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

2. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), 17, quoted in Sampson, 28.

3. Patrick Moore, *A Beginner's Guide to Astronomy* (London: PRC Publishing, 1997), 12, quoted in Sampson, 28.

4. Sampson, 45.

5. George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," downloaded from http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html May 7, 2001.

6. Ibid.

7. Sampson, 34.

8. Sampson, 36-37.

9. George de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (London: Heinemann, 1958), xii, quoted in Sampson, 37.

10. Sampson, 38.

11. William R. Shea, "Galileo and the Church" in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 312, quoted in Sampson, 39.

12. Sampson, 93.

13. Sampson, 94.

14. Sampson, 94.

15. Sampson, 97-98.

16. D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990), 12, quoted in Sampson,

98.

17. Sampson, 99.

18. Sampson, 130.

19. Laurie, Cabot, *Power of the Witch* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1992), 62, quoted in Sampson, 130.

20. Sampson, 133.

21. Sampson, 144.

22. Sampson, 133.

23. Sampson, 134-135.

24. Sampson, 134.

25. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), 37, quoted in Sampson, 139.

26. Sampson, 141.

27. Sampson 137.

28. Trevor-Roper, 22, quoted in Sampson, 137.

29. Sampson, 133.

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Confident Belief

Introduction

It’s hard to imagine how any Christian at any time in history could live life completely free from any doubts about the truth of the faith. Suffering, inconsistent behavior among Christians, the lure of the world, intellectual misgivings—these things and others can lead us to question whether it’s all true.

Since the days of the early church there have been objections to the gospel which have given pause to Christians. Can I really believe this? *Should* I believe this? Doubt is part of human experience, and Christians experience it no less than non-Christians. Doubts about our faith are more momentous than many we deal with, however, because of their implications. I have my doubts about whether my favorite football team will be in the Super Bowl, but I can still hang in there with them as a fan. The claims of Christ are much more momentous, however. Our individual destinies and more are at stake.

We find ourselves today in the West beset by two different schools of thought which can cause us to doubt. On the one hand are the modernists, heirs of the Enlightenment, who believe that reason is sufficient for true knowledge and that Christianity just doesn’t measure up to sound reason. On the other hand are postmodernists who don’t believe anyone can know what is true, and are astonished that we dare lay claim to having *the* truth about ultimate reality.

I’d like to look at these two mindsets to see if they have legitimate claims. The goal is to see if either should be allowed to rob us of our confidence.

Modernism and Certain Knowledge

Modernists believe that our reason is sufficient to know truth, in fact the *only* reliable means of attaining knowledge. Only that which can be scientifically measured and quantified

and reasoned through logically can constitute true knowledge.

What does this say, however, about things that *can't* be so measured, things such as beauty, morals, and matters of the spirit? Can we not have knowledge of such things? We have inherited the belief that such things are at best matters of opinion; they are subjective matters having to do only with the individual's experiences and tastes.

This way of thinking is disastrous for religious beliefs of almost any kind. Christianity in particular makes claims that can't be weighed or counted or measured (although there *are* elements which *can* be empirically tested): the nature of God, justification by faith, the deity of Christ, and the reality of the Holy Spirit are a few examples. Since these elements are central but don't fit within our logical, scientific mindset, they are said to be matters of personal opinion at best, or figments of our imagination at worst.

The matter of the "knowability" of the faith is a problem for nonbelievers, but it can be a worse problem for believers. Those whom Daniel Taylor calls "reflective Christians" often find themselves betrayed by their own doubts; they feel the weight of providing for themselves the kind of evidences a nonbeliever might demand and feel guilty when they cannot produce in their own minds a logical certainty for their beliefs.{1} What such a believer typically does is continue to mount up evidence and arguments and think and talk and think some more and hope that one day either the missing link will come clear or he will be able to "call off thoughts awhile," in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.{2}

Postmodern Skepticism

Times are changing, though, and the problem Christians face more and more is the challenge coming from the other end of the spectrum. If modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge at

all. While on the one hand modernists say there is not enough evidence to trust our beliefs, on the other hand postmodernists tell us our evidences mean nothing regarding the truth value of our faith.

Postmodernists believe that truth is a construct of our own imagination and desires. They believe there is no single, unifying account of reality that covers everything, one *metanarrative* as they call it. They believe one must leave everything an open question, that one shouldn't settle anywhere since there is no way to know ultimate truths at all. Our own realities are created for us partly by our society and partly by our own exercise of power, often by the very words we use.

Is the Christian, then, now to think of her faith as just that? *Her* faith? Something that has validity for *her* and her *group* but not necessarily for everyone? This kind of thinking fosters religious pluralism, the belief that truth is found in many different religions. This is disastrous for Christianity for it leaves us wondering why we should hold to these beliefs when others might be more attractive.

Thus, there is on the one hand the modernist who thinks we can know everything we need to know using our reason, and on the other the postmodernist who thinks the search for knowledge is a waste of time. In the face of these mindsets, what should we do? Should we resign ourselves to feeling guilty and maybe a little intellectually perverse because we can't assign mathematical certainty to our beliefs? Or do we swallow the skepticism of postmodernists and just hold our beliefs as the creations of our own minds and wills? It is my contention that we needn't be bound by either position on truth and knowledge, but that we can have knowledgeable confidence in the truth of the faith.

Modernism: The Enlightenment Search for Knowledge

Modernity was the era which had its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which continued until recent years. Although postmodernism seems to be the order of the day, one worldview doesn't come to a screeching halt one day and another pick up the next. Thus, there are still many people who view life in modernist terms.

Modernists believe that reason is the only truly reliable source of knowledge. Revelation is set aside. Since reason is the authority, only that which has logical or mathematical certainty can be accepted as true knowledge. Anything less can only have some level of probability. The attacks of empiricists such as David Hume apparently rendered Christianity highly *im*probable.

Lesslie Newbigin argues that this demand for indubitable knowledge gave rise to the skepticism of our day. In fact, postmodern skepticism is a sharp rejection of Enlightenment thought.

Let's look briefly at the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge.

René Descartes and the Search for Certainty

In response to the skepticism of the 17th century, mathematician/philosopher René Descartes accepted the challenge of providing an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt.{3} Descartes's approach was to use the tool of the skeptics—which is *doubt*—as his starting point. He threw out everything that couldn't be known indubitably, and was left with one idea which he couldn't doubt: I think, therefore I am. He developed his philosophy from this starting point.

Two important points are to be made about Descartes's method.

First, he made the break from starting with God as the measure of all things to starting with the individual person. Human reason was now the supreme arbiter of truth.{4} Second, Descartes established doubt as a principle of knowledge.{5} In modern times, critical thinking doubts everything until it is proved true.

On this basis, Western man devoted himself to knowing as much as he could about his world without any reference to God, and with the idea that knowledge had to be logically or mathematically certain. Knowledge is quantifiable; one must strip away anything other than brute, objective facts which can be weighed, counted, or measured or deduced from facts which can be so quantified. Knowledge was to be objective, certain, and dispassionate—not subject to personal feelings or values or faith commitments. As theologian Stanley Grenz says, "The new tools of research included precise methods of measurement and a dependence on mathematical logic. In turning to this method, Enlightenment investigators narrowed their focus of interest—and hence began to treat as real only those aspects of the universe that are measurable."{6}

On the heels of Descartes came Isaac Newton who gave us a vision of the cosmos as being an orderly machine, an idea in keeping with the rationalism of Descartes. The universe could be understood once its laws were understood. Although Descartes and Newton believed their ideas gave support to their Christian beliefs, they were subsequently used for just the opposite. "The modern world turned out to be Newton's mechanistic universe populated by Descartes's autonomous, rational substance," says Grenz. "In such a world, theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist."{7}

Was Descartes's method significant in Western History? Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.{8}

In time, this approach was applied to other disciplines as well, from politics to ethics to theology. “In this way,” says Grenz, “all fields of the human endeavor became, in effect, branches of natural science.”{9}

Time has proved the value of scientific and mathematical reasoning. We all enjoy the benefits of technology. This being the case, however, why is it that we at the turn of the century find ourselves so skeptical? What has happened to the confidence modern man had in his ability to know?

Postmodernism: The Rejection of the Enlightenment Idea

With the acceptance of René Descartes’s idea that truth was to be found ultimately in reason, and that the starting point for knowledge was doubt, the die was cast for the period of history we call modernity. Using just his reason, and denying anything which wasn’t certain, the individual could come to true knowledge with no reference to God.

But skeptical attacks continued through such philosophers as David Hume. In response, Immanuel Kant formulated a new understanding of knowledge. He believed that knowledge came from data received by the senses which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of our own minds. Thus, the structure of our own minds became a crucial component of the known world. With Kant, the thinking individual was now firmly established as the final authority for truth. Even with this, however, Kant still believed there *is* a reality external to us, and that all our minds work the same way to understand it.

Although Kant believed that we could truly know the world around us, his ideas pushed us a significant step *away* from that reality. He believed that we are thus incapable of knowing things as they are *in themselves*; we only know things as they *appear* to us. Thus, since God doesn’t appear to us

empirically, we do not have real knowledge of Him. Philosophers following him began to pick away at his ideas. Johann Fichte, for example, accepted Kant's ideas for the most part, but denied the idea that there *are* things-in-themselves; in other words, that there is something to reality apart from our perceptions of it. What we perceive is what is there. Now the way was made clear to think in terms of "alternative conceptual frameworks." There could now be multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

Nietzsche

Other philosophers picked away at Kant as well, but we'll only consider one more, the man who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy,"{10} Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a true foe of modernism. He believed the whole project of building up these "great edifices of ideas"{11} was fundamentally flawed. Our attempts to abstract general knowledge from the particulars around us only results in distortion, he thought. He argued that "what we commonly accept as human knowledge is in fact merely a self-contained set of illusions. He essentially viewed 'truth' as a function of the language we employ and hence believed that truth 'exists' only within specific linguistic contexts."{12} Our world is only a construction of our own perspective, an aesthetic creation. And it has its roots in the will to power, "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external." Thus, "Motivated by the will to power," he thought, "we devise metaphysical concepts—conceptions of 'truth'—that advance the cause of a certain species or people."{13}

This is the heart of postmodern thought, and it surrounds us today. We cannot know the truth about reality; we only know our own constructions of it. We can hope to convince others to join us in our beliefs, but there is no room for rational argumentation, because one's views about the world are no

better or worse than any others. As Stanley Grenz says, "all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are equally valid because all are equally invalid."{14} No one can really know, so believe what you want. But in attacking the possibility of knowing truth, postmodernism has cut off the limb upon which it sits. One writer has noted that postmodernism has destroyed itself. "It has deconstructed its entire universe. So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern."{15}

These, then, are the primary choices our society offers for considering the truth value of Christianity. Either we can affirm the modernist attitude and be satisfied only with scientific or mathematical certainty, or with the postmodernist we can throw the whole truth thing out the window.

Impossible Demands, Groundless Limitations: A Critique

When challenged directly or indirectly by the world about the validity of our faith, what do we do? Do we continue to use modernistic ways of thinking to make a case for the faith, believing that we must provide logically certain proof? Or do we offer a postmodern, "true for me" argument relying on subjective matters which we use to persuade people to believe?{16} The answer lies in rejecting both the demands of modernism and the limitations of postmodernism.

Neither Mathematical Certainty . . .

In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that the modern approach was essentially wrong-headed, that it called for something which was unattainable.

With respect to the insistence on mathematical certainty,

Newbigin notes first that this way of thinking takes us away from the real world rather than moving us closer to it. He says, “The certainty of mathematical propositions, as Einstein often observed, is strictly proportionate to their remoteness from reality.”{17} For example, there is no such thing as a point as understood mathematically. Certainty belongs to the world of pure forms, not that of material things. “Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality,” he says.{18}

Second, thinkers in the Romantic period argued that “mathematical reason could not do justice to the fullness of human experience.” Such things as art and music and cultural traditions can’t be mapped out mathematically.{19}

Third, the ambition of dealing with facts apart from values or other non-factual biases is an impossible dream. We are never value-free in our thinking, even in the laboratory. As writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have shown (both of whom were scientists turned philosophers), what one studies and for what purpose, how one acts ethically in the lab and in the reporting of studies, what ones overall goals are for particular scientific work—all these reflect unproved value commitments; no one gives indubitable evidence for their validity. For all practical purposes it is impossible to remove such values held by faith.

In addition, I suggest that it isn’t merely practically impossible to remove these faith/value commitments: it would be *wrong* to attempt to do so. One must always situate one’s work in a framework of values to give it any significant meaning at all. Otherwise we are just acting, just doing things with no purpose to give coherence and direction.

Someone might object here that ones value commitments *can* be verified so as to render them no longer just faith commitments. To this Newbigin responds that faith is fundamental, even to doubt! For even doubt must rest on

beliefs which are not themselves doubted. This is because one doubts something because it conflicts with something else one already believes. If that prior belief is also subjected to the test of doubt, it, too, can only be doubted because of something else one believes, and so on. Further, if one's doubt itself is based upon certain criteria of truth, then those criteria themselves must be believed. If they, too, are subjected to doubt, then the criteria for evaluating *them* must be believed to be true criteria, and so on again. Of course, one could simply doubt everything—in other words, become a skeptic. But no one can live consistently as a skeptic. To get in a car and drive on the highway indicates that one believes the brakes will work. And we expect people to have a basic understanding of some normative moral values. Newbigin sums up: "One does not learn anything except by believing something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. . . . Rational doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa."{20}

It's important to realize, too, that the mathematical model simply doesn't apply across the board. Few areas of our lives are governed by such a high standard. Christianity isn't just a set of ideas to be logically constructed and evaluated. It is a Person relating to persons in particular historical contexts. We can place no stricter demands on this relationship regarding the certainty of knowledge than we do on the relationships we experience with people on earth in particular historical contexts.

On the plus side, we *do* have a significant body of evidence supporting our belief including historical evidences, rational arguments, and matters of the human experience such as the question of meaning—things which can't be quantified and thus find no place in modernistic thought. We also have no reason to adopt the reductionistic naturalism of modernism just on modernists' say so, but rather recognize the reality of and intrusion of the supernatural into our world.

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that the truth of Christianity doesn't rest on the fragility of human reason, although it is through our minds that we recognize its truth. It rests on the faithfulness of God who has made Himself known to us.{21} Our assurance comes from the combination of knowing, believing, and following the One who is true, not just from working out logical arguments.

Thus, we conclude that beliefs do *not* have to be indubitable to be held as true—in fact, very little of what we know has indubitable certainty—and unproved values form a necessary part of our knowledge. Modernists are not justified in requiring us to conform to their narrow standards for rationality.

. . . Nor Postmodern Skepticism

Although modernism was naïve in its expectations of reason, the reaction of postmodernism has been too severe.

In its reaction against modernism, postmodernism threw off the classical understanding of truth—namely, correspondence with reality. Having rejected the possibility of knowing what is real external to us, postmodernists have left us with only our own minds, wills, and words. Truth is the product of the creative activity of the individual.

But this clearly isn't the way we live. We assume that whenever we say something like, "It's raining outside," or even, "It's wrong to wantonly destroy the earth," we intend our words to reflect what really is the case.{22} Even the postmodernist will believe that injustice and oppression are wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Otherwise, how would we know that one act is morally acceptable and another unacceptable, even across cultures?{23} Thus, we reveal that we believe truth is there and accessible. Is there any reason to think that spiritual beliefs can't also correspond with reality? I can't think of any, *unless* one simply presupposes that

spiritual realities can't be known.

What's more, we typically act as if we believe truth is *objective*, by which we mean that something really is the case apart from whether we believe it or not.{24} How can we meaningfully interact with the world around us if we don't think we can truly know it and not simply our individual or group construction of it?

Postmoderns' belief that there can be multiple and conflicting truths must be rejected also, for if truth is that which conforms to reality and reality itself cannot be contradictory, truth cannot be either. Either it is raining outside my window or it's not. It can't be doing both at the same time in the same location. Likewise, for example, either God exists or He doesn't. It can't be both.

Against postmodernism, we hold that there is no reason to think there *can't* be one explanation for all of reality *unless* one accepts a radical perspectivalism; i.e., that our beliefs are *only* our own perspectives and not reflections of reality itself. For the postmodernist to say this is to reveal that he assumes he has the inside scoop on ultimate reality which he claims no one has. This is therefore a faith commitment. Furthermore, there's no reason to think we can't know what the true explanation *is*, especially if the One who knows about it perfectly tells us.

Postmoderns also believe that truth is a construct of language. Because the meanings of words can vary, each linguistic group has its own truth. However, the fact that there are different words for the same thing doesn't change the fact that the referent is the same. We don't change the nature of something simply by changing the words we use for it. This is the weakness of what has been called "political correctness." It is thought, it seems, that by using different words for something we thereby change the thing itself. While a change of terminology might change our *attitude* about

something, it doesn't change that something itself.

Thus, we reject the skepticism of postmodernity and confidently rest on the faith we hold as describing the way things really are.

We believe that there is no reason to accept postmodern skepticism. Skepticism is ultimately unlivable, and we needn't spend our lives "playing with the pieces." There is no reason in principle to assume we *can't* know ultimate realities just because of our human limitations. It is arbitrary to simply decide God cannot reveal truth to us because of our limitations.

Further, there is no reason why there can't be one explanation of reality. The good news for postmodernists is that we *have* been met by the One who created the "story" of the world and is able to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. His is the one true explanation of reality. We deny that we are trapped behind our own perspectives, cut off from direct contact with reality,{25} and thus not able to "impose" truth on others. Truth is knowable and sharable.

Postmodernists believe that each person can only have his or her own "story" or life's situation, that each of us can only have his or her own little piece. We respond that we have a story that puts all the pieces together, a story which is coherent and consistent and which matches the nature of the needs of humanity. As we look around the world we see that we all are very much alike in our basic needs and aspirations. If there is such a thing as human nature and a human condition, it isn't unreasonable to think there could be one explanation of it.

Summary

Modernism served to produce doubts through its insistence upon certain knowledge, and postmodernism produces doubt through its insistence that no one can really know ultimate truths.

Can we have confidence in the trustworthiness of our beliefs in the face of modernist and postmodernist ideas?

In response to doubts produced by modernism we look to Jesus, a historical Person who has revealed to us more than our reason is capable of discovering on its own. In response to doubts engendered by postmodernism, we look to Jesus the Creator of all and the final Word who has revealed to us ultimate truth. In him we find truth in its fullest sense, as the one who is real and trustworthy and who speaks. We can have confidence in our beliefs.

Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 18-19.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

4. Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 22-23, 227-28.

5. For this reason Descartes has been called the father of modern philosophy. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. “Descartes, Ren,” by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

6. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66.

7. Ibid., 67. Grenz notes that “Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years” by making human reason central.

8. Ibid., 64.

9. Ibid., 67.

10. Ibid., 88.

11. Ibid., 89.

12. Ibid., 90.

13. Ibid., 92.

14. Ibid., 164,

15. Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2000), 169.

16. There are some who believe we can put to use some of the perspectives of postmodernism, but it would take us too far afield of our subject to develop that now. For our purposes, I'm only concerned with the central skepticism of postmodernism.

17. Newbigin, 51.

18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 24, 25.

21. Ibid., 67.

22. For a recent study on truth in relation to postmodernism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay.*

23. Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 197-199.

24. Against modernism, however, we can affirm that believing

in objective truth doesn't require that there be no non-provable elements involved in coming to know truth.

25. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 63.

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Sheep Among Wolves

What's the Problem?

In Colossians 2:8, Paul states that a Christian should . . .

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Paul's words have particular application for the Christian student who is about to engage in the intellectual and social combat that can be found on many of our college campuses. Our higher educational institutions are often incubators for non-Christian thought and life. Christian students must be advised to be prepared. Too many of them are "taken captive." Consider these few examples:

> • A sociology professor asked her students, "How many of you believe abortion is wrong? Stand up." Five students stood. She told them to continue standing. She then asked, "Of you five, how many believe it is wrong to distribute condoms in middle schools?" One was left standing. The professor left this godly young lady standing in silence for a long time and then told her she wanted to talk with her after class.

During that meeting the student was told if she persisted in such beliefs she would have a great deal of difficulty receiving her certification as a social worker.

• During the first meeting of an architecture class at a large state university the students were told to lie on the floor. The professor then turned off the lights and taught them to meditate. (Be assured they were not meditating on Scripture.)

• At a church-related university a professor stated, “Communism is definitely superior to any other political-economic system.”

• In an open declaration on the campus at Harvard, the university chaplain announced he is homosexual.

• When asked how he responds to students who confess strong Christian convictions, a professor stated, “If they don’t know what and why they believe, I will change them.”

• In a university dormitory crowded with over 100 students I declared that Jesus is the only way to God. Many of the students expressed their strong disagreement and anger. One student was indignant because he realized my statement concerning Christ logically meant that his belief in a Native American deity was wrong. Even some Christian students were uncomfortable. They had uneasiness about it because it seemed too intolerant.

These are but a few of many illustrations and statistics that could be cited as indication of contemporary college life. The ideas that are espoused on many of our campuses can understandably bewilder the Christian student. What can be done to help them in their preparation? In this article I will offer some suggestions that can serve to give them guidance.

Develop a Christian Worldview

A critical component in the arsenal of any Christian heading off to college is to develop a Christian worldview. Everyone has a world view whether they have thought about it or not. To understand how important a worldview is consider a jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces. In order to put the puzzle together you need to see the picture on the box top. You need to know what the puzzle will look like when you finish it. If you only had the pieces and no box top, you would probably experience a great deal of frustration. You may not even want to begin the task, much less finish it. The box top gives you a guide and helps you put together the "pieces" of life.

The box top in a Christian worldview is provided by the revealed truth of the Bible. The Bible contains the correct picture to help us assemble the individual pieces we encounter in life. Other world views will always get some portion of the picture right, but a few important pieces will always seem out of place. It's important for a young Christian college student to have some idea of which pieces are out of place in other worldviews as well as a foundational understanding of a Christian worldview.

Essentially a worldview is a set of assumptions or presuppositions we hold about the basic make-up of our universe that influences everything we do and say. For instance, within a Christian world view we wake up in the morning assuming that God exists and that He cares about what happens to you.

There are four essential truths that help us evaluate different worldviews.

The first truth is that *something exists*. This may seem obvious, but many people aren't sure. Many forms of pantheism argue that the material world is just an illusion. The only reality is spiritual. If this were actually the case, then

physical consequences wouldn't matter. However, I have yet to find a pantheist who is willing to perform their meditation on a railroad track without knowing the train schedule.

The second truth is that *all people have absolutes*. There are always some things that people recognize as true, all the time. For Christians, God is the ultimate reference point to determine truth. Even the statement, "There are no absolutes!" is to declare absolutely that there are no absolutes.

Third, *truth is something that can't be both true and false at the same time*. This is critical in our current time. A contemporary idea is that all religions are the same. This sounds gracious, but it's nonsense. While various religions can often have some elements in common, if they differ in the crucial areas of creation, sin, salvation, heaven, and hell, then the similarities are what is trivial, not the differences.

Last, we need to realize that *all people exercise faith*. What matters is the object of our faith. We all use faith to operate through the day. We exercise faith every time we take medication. We assume it will help us and not harm us. Carl Sagan's famous statement that "The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be" is a statement of naturalistic faith not scientific truth.

Take Ownership of Beliefs

Parents need to help their student headed off to college to take ownership of their faith. Too often Christian young people spend their pre-college years repeating phrases and doctrines without intellectual conviction. They need to go beyond clichés. A few of us at Probe have questioned Christian high school students about their faith by posing as an atheistic college professor. When pressed to explain why they believe as they do, the responses get rather embarrassing. They'll say, "That's what my parents taught me," or "That's

what I've always heard," or "I was raised that way," or "That's what my pastor said."

If this is the best a student can do, they are simply grist for the mill. They are easily ground down to dust. Paul wrote to young Timothy saying, "Continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). Timothy was taught by his mother, grandmother, and Paul. He not only learned about his faith from them, but he became convinced that it was true.

This means you are to know not just what you believe but also why. Ask yourself or your student why he or she is a Christian? If this question stumps you, you've got some thinking and exploring to do. The apostle Peter said to always be prepared to give a defense to anyone who asks for an account of the hope that is in you. (1 Peter 3:15)

Peter wrote that we are always to be ready, and we are to respond to everyone who asks. These are all-encompassing words that indicate the importance of the task of apologetics. If the student is going to live and think as a Christian on campus he will be asked to defend his faith. Such an occasion will not be nearly as threatening if he or she has been allowed to ask their own questions and have received answers from their home or church.

For instance, how would you answer these questions if someone who really wants to know asked them of you? "Is there really a God?" "Why believe in miracles?" "How accurate is the Bible?" "Is Christ the only way to God?" "Is there any truth in other religions?"

Such questions are legitimate and skeptics deserve honest answers to their tough questions. How they receive the answer is between God and them. Our responsibility is to provide the answers as best as we can in a loving manner. To say, "I don't know, I just believe," will leave the impression that

Christianity is just a crutch and therefore only for the weak and feeble-minded.

The Mind Is Important

A student needs to understand that the mind is important in a Christian's life. In fact, a Christian is required to use his mind if he desires to know more of God and His works among us. The acts of reading and studying Scripture certainly require mental exercise. Even if a person can't read, he still has to use his mind to respond to what is taught from Scripture. For example, Jesus responded to a scribe by stating the most important commandment:

> Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29-30)

The use of our mind refers not only to Scripture. We need to abolish the sacred/secular barrier many of us have erected. Colossians 3:17 says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to Him through God the Father." Paul pretty much covers it. It's hard to come up with anything additional after using the words "whatever" and "all." This includes our academic studies.

The first chapter of Daniel offers amazing insights into this issue. Daniel and his friends were taught everything that the "University of Babylon" could offer them; they graduated with highest honors and with their faith strengthened. God honored them in the task and even gave them the knowledge they needed to grapple with Babylonian ideas. (Daniel 1:17, 20)

If Daniel's situation is applied to a contemporary Christian student's life, there is an important lesson to be learned. That is, the young Jewish boys learned and understood what they were taught, but that does not mean they believed it.

Many students have asked how to respond on papers and exams that include ideas they don't believe. As with Daniel and his peers, they should demonstrate their understanding to the best of their ability, but they cannot be forced to believe it. Understanding and believing are not necessarily the same thing. But a certain level of understanding is crucial in knowing where these ideas fail to meet reality.

If Christian students have also been allowed to ask questions at home and at church, then they can apply the lessons learned by asking questions of those of differing faiths. This will allow them to expose the inconsistencies of these competing worldviews in a respectful manner.

Many Christian students enter an ungodly educational arena every year. They should be encouraged with the understanding that God's truth will prevail, as it did for Daniel and his friends. For all truth is God's truth.

How Do We Teach these Things?

Coming to the end of our discussion on preparing students to defend their faith in college, you may be asking, "How can I apply some of these suggestions in my life with students?" The following ideas are offered with the belief that you can use your imagination and arrive at even better ones.

First do role-plays with your students occasionally. This can be done either with an individual or a group.

For example, as alluded to previously, find someone from outside your church or school that the students don't know. This person should have a working knowledge of the ways non-Christians think. Introduce him to the group as a college professor researching the religious beliefs of high school students.

The "professor" should begin to ask them a series of blunt questions regarding their beliefs. The idea is to challenge

every cliché the students may use in their responses. Nothing is to be accepted without definition or elaboration. After ten minutes or so, reveal who the professor really is and assure them he is a Christian. Then go over some of the answers and begin to reveal what they could have said.

This would also be good time to implement a second suggestion, and that is to teach a special course on apologetics for upper high school students. You've definitely got their attention now and they will be much more attentive.

Another idea is if you live near a college or university, ask to be put on their mailing list for upcoming lectures from visiting scholars. After attending one of these lectures, discuss it with your student. See if they can identify the speaker's worldview and where what they said conflicts with a Christian worldview. This would also be a good place to model asking good questions if a question and answer period is allowed.

When considering a college or university, the student should not only visit the campus to investigate campus life but also the intellectual atmosphere. Visit with representatives of a local college ministry or a Christian faculty member and inquire of their opinion of the likely intellectual challenges they can expect to find. This would also be a good opportunity to ask about resources available for Christian students who face challenges in the classroom.

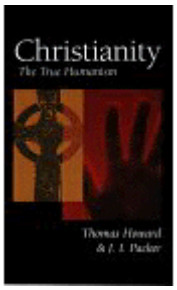
Finally, consider sending your student to a Probe *Mind Games* Conference. A schedule of all our upcoming conferences is available on our website at www.probe.org. Just click on the *Mind Games* tile on the home page to open a menu of information on our conferences. Or better yet, organize one of these conferences in your own community. Probe travels around the country in order to help youth, college students, their parents, and the church at large prepare for contemporary life.

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Christianity: The True Humanism

Christianity and Humanism

What does it take to be human?



Does that sound like an odd question? One is human by birth, right? J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard seek to explain and answer that question in their book *Christianity: The True Humanism*.{1} This delightful and insightful book, first published in the mid-'80s, is now back in print. Since it provides valuable insight for apologetics—and is one of my favorites—I'd like to share a few of its insights.

To bring out a Christian view of what makes for a truly fulfilling human experience, the authors contrast it with that of secular humanism. Secular humanism is the belief that mankind can truly find itself apart from any reference to God. It seeks to elevate the human race through a confidence in our ability to understand and order our world guided by our own reason and standing on the findings and possibilities of science.

One note before continuing. Some have objected to connecting the word *humanism* with *Christian*. Doesn't it suggest the

exaltation of people? If you are familiar with either of the authors, you'll know that isn't their intent at all. As they say, "This book is an attempt to describe the sense in which the Christian religion both undergirds and nourishes all that seems to mark our true humanness."{2}

Because *Christianity: The True Humanism* explores the meaning of Christianity for the human experience, it adds to our apologetic for the faith. The authors write: "The best defense of any position is a creative exposition of it, and certainly that is the best means of persuading others that it is true."{3}

What Do We Need to be Human?

So, what *do* we need to live a full life? It might be hard to get started answering that, but once the answers start they come in a rush. A sense of identity is one thing we need. How about adequate food, companionship, peace, beauty, goodness, and love? Freedom, a recognition by others of one's dignity, some measure of cultural awareness, and a worthy object of veneration also fill certain needs. Recreation, a sense of one's own significance, and meaning in life are a few more.

Animals don't seem to be concerned about most of these things. As the authors say, "Once you get a dog fed he can manage. Give a puffin or a gazelle freedom to range around and it will cope without raising any awkward questions about esteem and meaning."{4}

Far from being a religion of escape which calls people away from the realities of life, as critics are wont to say, Christianity calls us to plunge in to the issues that matter most and see how the answer is found in Jesus Christ. The good things in life are pursued with God's blessing. The difficult things are taken in and worked through, leaving the results to God. Here there is no need for submerging oneself in a bottle

of alcohol to relieve the stress, no approval for running from the faults of a failing spouse into the arms of another, no settling for a grimy existence from which there is no escape but death.

What is the testimony of saints around us and those who've gone before us? "If what the saints tell us is true," say the authors, "Christian vision illuminates the whole of our experience with incomparable splendor. Far from beckoning us away from raw human experience, this vision opens up to us its full richness, depth, and meaning."{5} They tell us that to run into the arms of Christ is not to run away from one's humanness, but to find out what it means to be fully human. Even our imaginations give testimony that there is more to life than drudgery; we might try to walk machine-like through life ignoring its difficulties, but our imaginations keep bringing us back. There is something bigger. "Our imaginations insist that if it all comes to nothing then existence itself is an exquisite cheat,"{6} for it keeps drawing us higher.

In this article we'll consider four issues—freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—as we explore what it means to be fully human.

Freedom

What does freedom mean to you? When you find yourself wishing to be free, what is it you want? Are you a harried supervisor facing demands from your superiors and lack of cooperation from your subordinates? Freedom to you might mean no demands from above and no obligations below. Are you a student? Freedom might mean no more course requirements, no more nights spent hunched over a desk while others are out having a good time.

My Webster's dictionary gives as its first definition of freedom: "not under the control of some other person or some arbitrary power; able to act of think without compulsion or

arbitrary restriction."{7} To be free is thus to be able to do something without unreasonable restriction. Of course what will constitute the experience of freedom will vary from person to person according to our interests and desires. But are there any commonalities rooted in human nature which will inform everyone's understanding of freedom?

A Christian View of Freedom

When we think about freedom we typically focus on our external circumstances which hinder us from doing what we want. If only our circumstances were different we could *really* be free. But if freedom lies primarily in being able to do as we please, very few of us will ever know it. So, freedom can be very elusive; it comes in fits and snatches, and too often our sights are set on things outside our reach anyway.

Given the contrast between the dimensions of our dreams and the restrictions we face, is it possible for anyone to truly be free? It is when we understand our true nature and what we were meant to be and do.

Let's first distinguish between *subjective* freedom and *objective* freedom. *Subjective* freedom is that psychological sense of contentment and fulfillment which comes with doing the best we know and want to do. *Objective* freedom is that condition of being in a situation well-suited to our own makeup which provides for our doing the best thing. It lies, in other words, in being and doing what we were meant to be and do. Like the car engine that is free when the pistons can move up and down unhindered—and not flop wildly in all directions—we, too, are free when we operate according to our makeup and design.

Because we were created by God according to His plan, freedom results from aligning ourselves with God's design. This requires understanding human nature generally so we can know

those things which are best for all people, and understanding ourselves individually so we can know what we are best suited to be and do. This understanding of human nature and of ourselves is then subjected to the law of love in service to others. Because we are made like God, we are made to do for others; to sacrifice for the good of other people. It is God's love which has set us free, and which enables us to let go of our own self-interests in order to reach out to others. This is true freedom in the objective sense. "When nothing and no one can stop you from loving, then you are free in the profoundest sense."{8} But this means being free from any desires of our own which would hinder us from doing those things for others we should be doing.

This focus on love of others contrasts sharply with what we're told in modern society, that freedom means focusing on ourselves. "It is the stark opposite of all egocentrism, self-interest, avarice, pride, and self-assertion—the very things, so we thought, that are necessary if we are ever to wrest any freedom from this struggling, overcrowded, and oppressive world of ours."{9}

The key figure to observe, of course, is Jesus. We might consider Him bound by his poverty and by the rigors of His ministry. But remember that He freely accepted the Father's call to sacrifice Himself for us. His very food was to do the will of the Father. Jesus was free because He fit perfectly in the Father's plan, and there was nothing that could keep Him from accomplishing the Father's wishes which were also His *own* desire.

In summary, the freedom people long for—of being rid of expectations and restrictions so one can do what one wants—turns out to be illusory. We are free when we rid ourselves of the things which prevent us from living in obedience to the God who has loved us and given Himself for us, for this is what we were designed to do.

Dignity

The Imago Dei

One of the words seldom heard today to describe a person is *dignified*. What does that word bring to mind? Perhaps a stately looking gentleman, dressed formally and with impeccable manners . . . but looking all the world like he'd be more comfortable if he'd just relax!

Packer and Howard believe that dignity is an important component of a full humanity. Dignity is "the quality of being worthy of esteem or honor; worthiness." It refers to a "proper pride and self-respect"{10} True dignity is not the stuffiness of some people who think they are not part of the riff-raff of society. When we react against such arrogance we need to realize that our reaction is not against dignity itself. For it is our innate sense of the dignity of all people, no matter what their place in society, that makes such airs objectionable.

Dignity is defined objectively by our nature, and is subjectively revealed in the way we act. What is that something about us that warrants our being treated with dignity and calls for us to act dignified (in the best sense)? That something is the *imago Dei*, the image of God, which is ours by virtue of creation. We have a relationship to the Creator shared by no other creature because we are like Him. This gives us a special standing in creation, on the one hand, but makes all people equal, on the other.

Secular humanism, by contrast, sees us as just another step on the evolutionary ladder. Our dignity is dependent upon our *development* (as the highest animal currently). Although at present we might demand greater honor than animals because we're on the top, there is nothing in us by nature that makes us worthy of special honor. "By making dignity dependent upon development," Packer and Howard say, "the humanist is opening

the door to the idea that less favored, less well-developed human beings have less dignity than others and consequently less claim to be protected and kept from violation than others."{11} Hence, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. One has to wonder, too, if there is a connection between we've been taught about our lack of natural worth by evolutionists and the lack of concern for behaving in a dignified manner in public life.

Furthermore, secular humanism treats people according to their usefulness, either actual or potential. "To be valued for oneself, as a person, is humanizing," say the authors, "for it ennobles; but to be valued only as a hand, or a means, or a tool, of a cog in a wheel, or a convenience to someone else is dehumanizing—and it depresses. . . . Secular humanism, though claiming vast wisdom and life-enhancing skills, actually diminishes the individual, who is left in old age without dignity (because his or her social usefulness is finished) and without hope (because there is nothing now to look forward to)."{12}

Worship—Drawn Up to Full Height

If recognizing our dignity means understanding our highest self or nature, in what kind of situation or activity is our dignity most visible? Packer and Howard say it is in worshipping God that our dignity is most fully realized.

Why is that? There are a couple of reasons. First, we are made to worship, and dignity is found in doing what we are made to do. "The final dignity of a thing is its glory—that is, the realizing of its built-in potential for good. . . . The true glory of all objects appears when they do what they were made to do."{13} Like a car engine made to operate a certain way, we were made to bring all of our life's experience into the service of glorifying God.

Second, the object of one's worship reflects back on the

worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.

Moral Life—Marking the Dignity of Others

Does all this mean non-Christians have no dignity or aren't worthy of being treated in a dignified manner? Of course not. The authors summarize their idea this way: "To the Christian, every human being has intrinsic and inalienable dignity by virtue of being made in God's image and realizes and exhibits the full potential of that dignity only in the worship and service of the Creator."{14} Because of our inherent value as human beings, we all deserve to be treated in a certain way. Christians are to treat people according to their innate worth. We love people as Christ loves us. We also seek to guide them to the place of their highest fulfillment which is in Christ.

Thus, Christianity "reveals us to ourselves as the most precious and privileged of all God's creatures."{15} And therein lies our dignity.

Culture

What does it mean to be cultured? In one sense it has to do with the finer things in life. People visit the great museums and cathedrals and concert halls of this and other countries, take evening classes at the local college, learn foreign languages, take up painting and pottery making as hobbies. Even those who have little interest in the fine arts have an appreciation for skilled craftsmanship.

Being cultured also can mean being well-mannered, knowing what

is considered appropriate and inappropriate in social interaction.

What is at the root of what it means to be cultured? Personal preference is part of it, if we're thinking of the arts for example. But culture goes deeper than that to matters of *taste*. "Taste is a facet of wisdom," say Packer and Howard; "it is the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not." It has to do with *appropriateness*, with fitness and value.

But how do we measure appropriateness? Traditionally we have measured it by our view of the value of humankind. Does what comes off the artist's easel in some manner elevate our humanness? Or at least does it not degrade humanity? Do we treat people in a way which shows respect for them, which is the essence of good manners? To be in good taste is to be characterized by being appropriate to the situation. With respect to culture, it is to be appropriate given our nature. On the other hand, to be in poor taste is to be "unworthy of our humanness."{16} To appreciate the value in people and in their creative expression is to be cultured.

Should Christians be concerned about culture? While Christianity *per se* is indifferent to matters of culture (for the message is to all people of all cultures, and we should value the contributions of all cultures), Christians ourselves aren't to be indifferent. In our daily lives we should be demonstrating habits and tastes informed by the Gospel, and these should mark whatever we put their hands to. We are to treat people with respect as having been made in God's image. We also apply ourselves creatively in imitation of God, and our creativity should reflect God's view of mankind and the world. Our creative activity in this world is what some refer to as the "cultural mandate." "When man harnesses the powers and resources of the world around him to build a culture and so enrich community life, he is fulfilling this mandate," say our authors.{17} In doing this we reflect the redemptive work

God has been doing since Adam and Eve.

While, on the one hand, we should appreciate the cultural contributions of anyone which elevate mankind and more clearly reflect God's attitude toward us and our world, on the other hand we are under no obligation to accept anything and everything in the name of "creativity." We can't applaud the blasphemous or immoral. And this is where Christianity stands against secular humanism. For the latter, in its demotion of man to the level of animal and its elevation of human liberty above all transcendent standards, must allow wide freedom in creativity, whether it be crucifixes in urine or erotic performance art. But in doing so it ultimately degrades us rather than exalts us. A sweeping look at the 20th century with its horrific assaults on humanity offers a clue as to the strength of moral standards devoid of God's will.

A few important notes here. First, although the Bible doesn't teach standards of beauty, "it charges us to use our creativity to devise a pattern of life that will fitly express the substance of our godliness, for this is what subduing the earth, tending God's garden, and having dominion over the creatures means."{18} Second, "the Gospel is the great leveler."{19} There is no room for pride, for exalting one culture above others.

One final note. Even given all that has been said about the significance of culture and our contribution to it, it is important to note that the demonstration of God's goodness to those around us through love and works of service is more important than "cultural correctness." We cannot turn our nose up at those who prefer comic books to classics or rap to Bach. For to do so is to deny the foundations of all we have been talking about, the inherent value of the individual person.

The Sacred

Convention, Taboos, and the Divine

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins argues that people today aren't truly relativists; they've merely swapped a new set of absolutes for the old.{20} It's fairly common for conventions and taboos to change over time, rightly or wrongly. One important question we need to ask, according to Packer and Howard, is this: "Which way of doing things does a greater service to what is truly human in us?"{21}

Taboos have to do with bedrock issues of fitness and decency. Packer and Howard tell us that our many social codes of behavior are "a secular expression of our awareness of the sacred, the inviolable, the authoritative, the 'numinous' as it is nowadays called—in short, the divine."{22}

Wait a minute. Isn't it a bit of an exaggeration to talk about taboos and conventions in terms of the divine? No, say our authors, for what we are seeking in all this is what is ultimate and fixed. Wherever there are conventions or attitudes which have such binding authority over us that to disregard them is taboo, "there you have what we called the footprints of the gods—an intuition, however anonymous and unidentified, of the divine."{23} As ideas and beliefs exert authority over our spirits, they become sacred.

We are a worshiping race. Because of our createdness we naturally find ourselves looking for the transcendent (although we typically look in the wrong places, and although secularists will deny they're looking for anything higher than what we ourselves can produce). We naturally find ourselves giving obeisance to one thing or another, often without conscious thought. "You can no more have a tribe, community, or civilization without gods," say our authors, "than you can have one without customs."{24} It is the rare secularist who is never pushed to the point of offering up a prayer in hopes that there is Someone listening. An awareness of the reality of the sacred seems to be built in to us.

In our post-Christian world there are a number of substitute religions. Even secular movements like Marxism become religions of a sort with icons and symbols and sacred books. In shrinking the sacred down to our own proportions we lose what we sought, however, for as the theology becomes debased, so does the religion. And debased religion in turn debases its devotees. Note what Paul said about this in Romans chapter 1.

The Meaning of Sacredness

With respect to God, sacredness refers to His holiness and inviolability and to the value that inheres in all He has made. He is set apart from and above us. "He is not to be profaned, insulted, defied, or treated with irreverence in any way."{25} God both *cannot* and *ought not* be challenged.

Furthermore, that which He has made is due a measure of honor, and those things which are set apart for special service are deserving of special honor. We wouldn't think of tearing up the original copy of the Constitution of the United States or of splashing paint on the Mona Lisa. Likewise—but even more so—we shouldn't think of abusing that which has come from the Maker's hand or treating that which has been set apart for His use as cheap. Here's an example of the latter: How many of us think of our church buildings and their furnishings as sacred in any sense? We no longer have the Temple; but are buildings erected expressly for the purpose of God's service really just cinder blocks and wood?

Sin and the Sacred

If we aren't to treat the objects of this world as less than they deserve, much less should we mistreat those who have been made in His image. To sin against others is to violate their sacredness and our own, for in doing so "we profane and defile

the sacred reality of God's image in us."{26}

For the secularist, as we've said before, without God all things have functional value only. As things or people outlive their usefulness they are to be discarded. The unborn who are malformed are of no use; they can be discarded. So, for example, the aged, now costing society rather than contributing to it, are to be assisted in death. But not so for the Christian. In taking seriously the sacredness of God and of what He has made, we preserve ourselves and provide protection against those things and ideas that would lessen or destroy us.

Freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—four aspects of the human experience. When we look at the Christian worldview and at secularism, it is clear which provides the greater promise for mankind. It is Christianity, and not secularism, which provides for human life in its fullness.

Notes

1. J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Berkhamsted, Herts, England: Word Publishing, 1985).
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Ibid., 39.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "free."
8. Packer and Howard, 60.
9. Ibid., 68.
10. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "dignity."
11. Packer and Howard, 138-39.
12. Ibid., 160.

13. Ibid., 152.
14. Ibid., 155.
15. Ibid., 160.
16. Ibid., 167.
17. Ibid., 177.
18. Ibid., 178.
19. Ibid., 172.
20. William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996). An article I wrote on this book can be found at Probe's Web site at www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/. This article was reprinted in Jerry Solomon, ed., *Arts, Entertainment, and Christian Values: Probing the Headlines That Impact Your Family* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000).
21. Packer and Howard., 187.
22. Ibid., 187-88.
23. Ibid., 189.
24. Ibid., 188.
25. Ibid., 195.
26. Ibid., 206.

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The Need to Read: G. K. Chesterton

Continuing in 'The Need to Read' series, Todd Kappelman examines the writings of G.K. Chesterton, a writer admired by both C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer.

A Christian for the Twentieth Century

This article is another installment in our continuing *Need to Read* series. The purpose of the series is to introduce people to authors they might enjoy and to offer some help by way of navigating through the themes developed in the works written by these individuals. It is regrettable that many people who enjoy C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer neglect the writings of Gilbert Keith, or G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a man who was admired by both Lewis and Schaeffer. George Bernard Shaw called him a "colossal genius" and Pope Pius XI called him "a devoted son of the Holy Church and a gifted defender of the faith."{1}

Until his death at the age of seventy-two, Chesterton was a dominant figure in England and a staunch defender of the faith, and Christian orthodoxy, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Roman Catholic church. In addition to nearly one hundred books, he wrote for over seventy-five British periodicals and fifty American publications. He wrote literary criticism, religious and philosophical argumentation, biographies, plays, poetry, nonsense verse, detective stories, novels, short stories, and economic, political, and social commentaries.{2}

An excellent introduction to Chesterton can be found in a book titled *Orthodoxy*, published in the United States in 1908, and affectionately dedicated to his mother. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton gives an apologetic defense of his Christian faith. He believed this defense was necessary to answer some of the criticism directed at his previous book, *Heretics*.{3}

Before Schaeffer wrote *Escape From Reason*, Chesterton titled the third chapter of *Orthodoxy* "The Suicide of Thought," a chronicle of the demise of modern man.

Chesterton believed that what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. "Modesty has moved from the organ of

ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert, is exactly the part he ought to doubt¾himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason."{4}

Chesterton believed that man's autonomy had been elevated beyond the reason of God; each individual has become his or her own master. The sages can see no answer to the problem of religion, but that is not the trouble with modern sages. Modern man, and his sages, said Chesterton, cannot even see the riddle.

Modern men, he believed, had become like small children who are so stupid that they do not even object to obvious philosophical contradictions.{5} Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer after him, understood that religion in the twentieth century would become very philosophical even for the average man. Chesterton reminds us that Christians would be living in a time when many of their friends, family, and neighbors, as well as their co-workers and spouses, would no longer be living as though man had to be reasonable. Later Francis Schaffer would call this same cultural phenomenon the age of *non-reason*.

Chesterton was very proud of being a Roman Catholic, and frequently defended his denomination as much as he did the faith in general. He was a Roman Catholic who was also deeply concerned about the universal church and will probably be enjoyed by most people who like C. S. Lewis and a "Mere Christianity" type of approach to the faith.

Chesterton and a Reasonable Christianity

In his book *The Everlasting Man* one can find the mature Chesterton. It was written in 1925 just three years after the

Roman Catholic church had received him at the age of almost fifty. In this book Chesterton employs a style of argumentation called the *reductio ad absurdum*.{6} He assumes some of the claims of rationalists and agnostics to show the absurdity of their point of view. He begins with a demonstration that if man is treated as a mere animal the result would not only be ridiculous, but the world would not exist in its present state. Men do not really act as though there is nothing special and significant about human beings. They act as though man is unique and that he is the most superior and crowning achievement in the known universe.

In a section titled "The Riddles of the Gospel" Chesterton attempts to show what it would be like if an individual were to approach the Gospels and really confront the Christ of history who is presented there. He would not find a Christ who looks like other moral teachers. The Christ presented in the New Testament is not dull or insipid, He is dynamic and unparalleled in history. The Christ of the Gospels is full of perplexities and paradoxes.

The *freethinker* and many nonbelievers, said Chesterton, object to the apparent contradictions found in the Bible, especially as it pertains to Christ. Jesus admonished His followers to turn the other cheek and take no thought for tomorrow. However, He did not turn the other cheek with respect to the money changers in the Temple and was constantly warning people to prepare for the future. Likewise, Christ's view of the marriage bond is unique and unparalleled in history. Jews, Romans, and Greeks did not believe or even understand enough to disbelieve the mystical idea that the man and the woman had become one sacramental substance in the matrimonial union.{7} Christ's view of marriage is neither a product of His culture or even a logical development from the time period. It is an utterly strange and wonderful teaching which bears the stigma of being from another world.

Before C. S. Lewis had formulated his observations that Christ

is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord, Chesterton had laid out the very same problem. The Christ of the New Testament, said Chesterton, is not a mere mythical figure. He cannot be merely another ethical teacher or even a good man; these options are not open to anyone who would honestly consider the Christ who is encountered in the Scriptures. The question remains, Who is Christ?

In *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton maintains that each of the aforementioned explanations are singularly inadequate. The belief that Christ was a delusional lunatic, or even a good teacher, suggests something of the mystery which they miss.{8} There must be something to a person who is so mysterious and confusing that he has inspired as much controversy as Christ.

Christ is who He said He was and is infinitely more mysterious than the finite human mind can fully comprehend. In his writings G. K. Chesterton demonstrates that he is a Christian writer who possessed those rare and necessary gifts which allow difficult theological and philosophical problems to be understood and discussed by the average man.

Chesterton's Reflections on America

Chesterton's writings cover theological, philosophical, social, political, and economic trends simultaneously with particular attention to a Christian worldview. In the two works *What I Saw In America* and *Sidelights,* Chesterton offers the reader his reflections on America during the early part of the twentieth century.

On January 10, 1921 Chesterton and his wife Frances began a three month tour of America. Their first stop was in New York City. Here Chesterton examined the lights of Broadway and proclaimed: "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."{9} This begins the great man's observations and impressions of the New World, skyscrapers, rural America, Washington politics, and

the nation's spiritual condition.

Some of the central themes that emerge in *Sidelights*, and especially in *What I Saw In America,* are Chesterton's views of the effects of rationalism, commercialism, and the general spiritual poverty of many Americans. Although he is painting with extremely large brush strokes, there is much that can be learned about who we were at the early part of the twentieth century and how we became what we are today.

Chesterton was able to see both sides of the American experiment: the dream as well as the nightmare. He appears to dwell on the down side to balance the kind of utopian optimism that frequently blinds Americans to the true realities of their living conditions. Chesterton said that his first impression of America was of something enormous and rather unnatural, and was tempered gradually by his experience of kindness among the people. Additionally, and with all sincerity, he added that there was something unearthly about the vast system which seemed to be a kind of wandering in search of an ideal utopia of the future. He said "the march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. [T]he latest modern sensation is a book," referring here to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, "written to show how wretched it is to live there."{10}

Chesterton thought about America frequently and she would be one of his favorite subjects for almost twenty-five years after his first visit. His frequent discussion about drinking and smoking may strike many readers as peripheral, a kind of antiquated masculine fun. But these matters were crucial to Chesterton's view of a complete life and for him represented a misguided moralism in the United States. The puritanical incongruity of Americans would serve Chesterton as a point of departure for all of his thinking about the New World.

Chesterton was an Englishman and is in a position to offer

criticism from the point of view of a foreigner without the difficulties of a language barrier. Although he understood that his native England and Europe at large were going through the same philosophical and social changes, it is the speed at which America was rushing to embrace all things new that alarmed him. In *What I Saw in America* one will really discover what Chesterton found alarming and dangerous about our country in the early twentieth century.

Chesterton was confronted with prohibition on both of his trips to America and was deeply concerned with its effects on both Christian and secular aspects of society. He never tired of the extended metaphor of prohibition as the condition of religion in the United States. Making a comparison between the Carrie Nation style of saloon smashing prohibition and the Nonconformists in his native England, Chesterton believed that both groups suffered from an astoundingly fixed and immovable notion of the nature of Christianity.{11}

Chesterton saw in this legalistic stance toward liquor an indicator of what was truly wrong Protestant religion in America. He said it is a pretty safe bet that if any popular American author has mentioned religion and morality at the beginning of a paragraph, he will at least mention liquor before the end of it. To men of different creeds and cultures the whole idea would be staggering.{12} The natural result was that the man on the street frequently equated Christianity with a strong stance against drinking, smoking, and gambling. As a consequence, salvation has as much to do with abstinence as it does with regeneration.

The Victorian hypocrisy was that there were family prayers and the form of religion, but only so far as it was a cover-up for an anti-traditionalist mentality. The average Christian, believed Chesterton, was professing his religion on the one hand and embracing a pervasive and destructive industrial commercialism on the other.{13} The astute observation of Chesterton was of a man witnessing a strange new phenomenon,

Christians reconciling their prosperity with their faith.

In spite of a Great Depression, one World War that would soon lead to another, and numerous social injustices, the twentieth century in the early thirties was still a time when personal ownership of cars, regular vacations, and numerous other opportunities were increasingly available to more Americans. This was the true formation of the American dream, and it would be closely tied to materialism in the most crass form.

Chesterton was vindicated in his harsh observations about America on several fronts. First, there was then and still remains a large segment of the Christian population that believes Christian faith to be little more than a list of prohibitions. It is not that there are not things Christians should and should not participate in, rather it is the stifling of the Christian imagination with respect to the many ways which faith can manifest itself. For Chesterton the belief that good Christians do not drink would be tantamount to saying that one must wear a tie on Sunday morning to be in good standing in the faith. In the same way that some consider the latter statement to be ridiculous it was puzzling to Chesterton, as well as C. S. Lewis, why some American Christians failed to recognize the same in the former statement.

As for the American dream, Chesterton's words are still a sober warning for the unique way in which Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, have largely become a nation of consumers. We may read his words during the early part of the twentieth century as warnings not to repeat the same mistakes now.

The Unreasonableness of Modern Man

Chesterton was a prolific journalist whose books and contributions to over one hundred American and British journals and periodicals continue to be read by Christians

throughout the world. The need to return to this seminal thinker can be seen in the relevance some of his shorter works still have today.

In the *T. P. Weekly* in 1910, Chesterton wrote a small piece titled *What is Right with the World?* In it he acknowledges the fact that the world does not appear to be getting very much better in any vital aspects and that this fact could hardly be disputed.{14} However, Chesterton does not leave the reader with the pessimistic observation that the world is not a very nice place. He adds that the only thing that is right with the world is the world itself. Existence itself as well as man and woman are right inasmuch as they were created right. The fact that so much is wrong did not distress Chesterton; it was merely an occasion

to demonstrate that the world bears the stigma of having been good at one time and now being evil. The blackness of the world, said Chesterton, is not so black if we recognize how and why things are like they are.

At one point in a work titled *The Common Man* Chesterton attempts to show why it is necessary for every individual to have a philosophy. The best reason being that certain horrible things will happen to anyone who does not possess some kind of coherent worldview.{15} Sounding very much like a contemporary Christian apologist, Chesterton said that a man without a philosophy would be doomed to live on the used-up scraps of other men's thought systems.{16}

Chesterton continues to challenge the idea that philosophy is for the few, arguing that most of our modern evils are the result of the want of a good philosophy. Philosophy, he said, was merely thought which had been thoroughly thought through. All men test everything by something. The question is whether the test has ever been tested.{17} One can see in Chesterton the same vigorous call to reflective thinking that Francis Schaffer used fifty years later to call an entire generation

of Christians to become more philosophic and begin engaging the culture at a more substantive level.

We have been attempting to make a case for the need to read G. K. Chesterton's works, and have urged those who enjoy C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, or Peter Kreeft to give Chesterton a look. In closing, Chesterton's poem *The Happy Man* from his book *The Wild Night* will serve as a conclusion.

> To teach the grey earth like a child,
> To bid the heavens repent,
> I only ask from Fate the gift
> Of one man well content.
> Him will I find: though when in vain
> I search the feast and mart,
> The fading flowers of liberty,
> The painted masks of art.
> I only find him as the last,
> On one old hill where nod
> Golgotha's ghastly trinity—
> Three persons and one God.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.
2. Hosea 4:6.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.
4. Ibid., 196.
5. Ibid., 217-224.
6. Ibid., 225-236.
7. Ibid., 261-270.
8. Ibid., 207-208.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990),

277.
10. Ibid., 275-290.
11. Ibid., 291-302.
12. Ibid., 211.

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