The Uniqueness of Jesus

Is Jesus the only way to heaven? The Gospels lead to one of three conclusions about Jesus Christ: He was either a liar, a lunatic, or truly Lord.

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

A serious study of the Gospels leads a person to one of three conclusions about Jesus: He was (1) an evil lying villain, (2) a preposterously deluded madman, or (3) the Messiah, the Son of God. It is ludicrous for anyone who has studied His life to take the position that He was simply a good teacher. Only one of the three conclusions is a logical possibility.

Jesus made some outrageous claims no ordinary person would dare to make. First, He claimed to be God. His statements of equality with God meant He believed that He possessed the authority, attributes, and adoration belonging to God. He proclaimed authority over creation, forgiveness of sins, and life and death. He declared to possess the attributes of God. He emphatically stated that He was the source of truth and the only way to eternal life. Only Jesus among the significant leaders of history made such claims.

Here are a few of His outrageous claims. When “Philip said, Lord, show us the Father.’ Jesus answered. . . .Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'” (John 14:8-9). Once, when the Pharisees were disparaging Jesus and challenging Him, Jesus responded, ” I and the Father are one.’ Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’ We are not stoning you for any of these,’ replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God'” (John 10:30-33). It is clear in these two statements, Jesus claimed to be God. His opponents clearly understood His declaration of equality with God.

When challenged by the scholars on His authority over Abraham, the father of the Jews, Jesus replied, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.’ The Jews said to Him, You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!’ I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!'” (John 8:56-58). Jesus clearly believed He had existed two thousand years earlier and knew Abraham.

On the issue of life and death Jesus stated, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25). Here He believed He had authority over life and death.

Finally, Jesus accepted and encouraged others to worship Him. Throughout the Gospels the disciples worshiped Jesus as seen in Matthew 14:33 and John 9:38. Jesus states in John 5:22-23, “Moreover, the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him.” Jesus knew the Old Testament command “Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Matt. 4:10). Despite this, Jesus encouraged others to worship Him. Either He was mad (insane), or He was who He claimed to be and deserves our worship as God incarnate.

After reading such claims, it is impossible for anyone to say He was merely a good teacher. A man making claims like these must either be a diabolical liar, insane, or God incarnate. For the remainder of this essay we will be discussing which of these conclusions is most plausible.

A Villain, A Madman, or God Incarnate?

We have established at this point that Jesus made some astounding claims about himself. He presumed to be God, claimed the authority and attributes of God, and encouraged others to worship Him as God. If, however, Jesus was a liar,

then He knew His message was false but was willing to deceive thousands with claims He knew were untrue. That is, Jesus knew that He was not God, He did not know the way to eternal life, and He died and sent thousands to their deaths for a message He knew was a lie. This would make Jesus history's greatest villain (and perhaps, a demon) for teaching this wicked lie. He would have also been history's greatest fool for it was these claims that lead Him to His death.

Few, if any, seriously hold to this position. Even the skeptics unanimously agree that He was at least a great moral teacher. William Lecky, one of Britain's most respected historians and an opponent of Christianity writes, "It was reserved for Christianity to present the world an ideal character which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love."{1}

However, it would be inconsistent and illogical to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher if some of those teachings contained immoral lies about himself. He would have to be a stupendous hypocrite to teach others honesty and virtue and all the while preach the lie that He was God. It is inconceivable to think that such deceitful, selfish, and depraved acts could have issued forth from the same being who otherwise maintained from the beginning to the end the purest and noblest character known in history.

Since the liar conclusion is not logical, let us assume He really believed He was God but was mistaken. If He truly believed He had created the world, had seen Abraham two thousand years before, and had authority over death, and yet none of this was true, we can only conclude that He was mad or insane.

However, when you study the life of Jesus, He clearly does not display the characteristics of insanity. The abnormality and imbalance we find in a deranged person are not there. His teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, remain one of the

greatest works ever recorded. Jesus was continually challenged by the Pharisees and lawyers, highly educated men whose modern day equivalent would be our university professors. They were fluent in several languages and were known for their scholarship of the Old Testament and Jewish law. They challenged Jesus with some of the most profound questions of their day and Jesus' quick answers amazed and silenced them. In the face of tremendous pressure, we find He exemplified the greatest composure.

For these reasons, the lunatic argument is not consistent. If both the liar and the lunatic options are not consistent with the facts, we must take a serious look at the third option: that Jesus was really God. The next question is, does He prove to have the credentials of God? Let us investigate this possibility.

Messianic Prophecy

Thus far we have learned that Jesus is unique among all men for the profound statements He made about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements, He must be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we will begin looking at the third alternative, that He really is God. First, we must see if He had the credentials for these claims.

One of the most incredible types of evidence is the testimony of prophecy. The Old Testament contains a number of messianic prophecies made centuries before Christ appeared on the earth. The fact that He fulfilled each one is powerful testimony that He was no ordinary man. Allow me to illustrate this point using eight prophecies.

- *Genesis 12:1-3 states the Messiah would come from the seed of Abraham.*

• Genesis 49:10 states that He would be of the tribe of Judah.

• 2 Samuel 7:12 states that Messiah would be of the line of King David.

• Micah 5:2 states that He would be born in the city of Bethlehem.

• Daniel 9:24 states He would die or be "cut off" exactly 483 years after the declaration to reconstruct the temple in 444 B.C.

• Isaiah 53 states that the Messiah would die with thieves, then be buried in a richman's tomb.

• Psalm 22:16 states upon His death His hands and His feet would be pierced. This is quite significant since Roman crucifixion had not been invented at the time the Psalmist was writing.

• Isaiah 49:7 states that Messiah would be known and hated by the entire nation. Not many men become known by their entire nation, and even less are despised by the entire nation.

Now calculate the possibility of someone fulfilling these by coincidence. Let us suppose you estimate there is a one in a hundred chance a man could fulfill just one of these prophecies by chance. That would mean when all eight are put together there is a 1/10 to the 16th power probability that they were fulfilled by chance. Mathematician Peter Stoner estimates 1/10 to the 17th power possibility that these prophecies were fulfilled by chance.{2} Mathematicians have estimated that the possibility of sixteen of these prophecies being fulfilled by chance are about 1/10 to the 45th power.{3} That's a decimal point followed by 44 zeroes and a 1! These figures show it is extremely improbable that these prophecies could have been fulfilled by accident. The figures for

fulfillment of the 109 major prophecies are staggering.{4}

Skeptics have objected to the testimony of prophecy, stating they were written after the times of Jesus and therefore fulfill themselves. However, the evidence overwhelmingly shows these prophecies were clearly written centuries before Christ. It is an established fact even by liberal scholars that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was completed in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in 250 B.C. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 contained the books of the Old Testament. Prophetic books like Isaiah were dated by paleographers to be written in 100 B.C.{5} Once again, these prophecies were confirmed to have been written centuries before Christ, and no religious leader has fulfilled anything close to the number of prophecies Jesus has fulfilled.

Confirmation of Miracles

Jesus made some profound statements about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements we must conclude Him to be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we began looking at the third alternative. If this is true, we must see if He has the credentials for His claims.

If a person claimed to be God, we would expect supernatural confirmations. We've already discovered the phenomenal record of prophecy. We would also expect Him to demonstrate authority over nature, sickness, truth, sin, and death. Jesus demonstrated such authority. One line of evidence is seen in His miraculous deeds.

Jesus' miracles demonstrated His power over creation, sickness, and death. He demonstrated His authority over nature in such miracles as walking on water (Matt. 14:25), multiplying bread (Matt. 14:15-21), and calming the storm

(Mark 4:35-41). He demonstrated authority over sickness with His instantaneous healings over terminal diseases. His healings did not take weeks or days but were instantaneous. He healed blindness (John 9), paralysis (Mark 2), leprosy (Luke 17), and deafness (Mark 7). Such miracles cannot be attributed to psychosomatic healing but to one who rules over creation. Jesus displayed authority over death by raising the dead as recorded in Luke 7 and Matthew 9.

Some doubt whether these miracles occurred. Several view the miracle accounts as fictitious legends developed after the death of Christ. Philosopher David Hume argued that human nature tends to gossip and exaggerate the truth. Others argue that the miracle accounts were propagated in distant lands by the followers of Christ well after the events so that the miracle accounts could not have been verified due to distance and time.

There are several arguments against these attacks. First, the Bible has proven to be a historically reliable document. For more information on this, see the Authority of the Bible article. Second, legends and exaggerations develop when followers travel to distant lands well after the time of the events and tell of stories which cannot be confirmed. Legends usually develop generations after the death of the figure at which time it is impossible to verify any of the accounts since all available witnesses are not available. However, the miracle accounts of Jesus were being told in the very cities in which they occurred during the lifetime of Jesus and to those who witnessed the event(s). Those who witnessed the miracles were followers of Christ and His enemies. These eye witnesses were questioned carefully by those in authority. If any claims were exaggerated or distorted, it could have easily been refuted. The New Testament with its miracle accounts could not have survived had not the accounts been true.

German scholar Dr. Carsten Theide and British scholar Dr. Matthew D'Ancona in their book *Eyewitness to Jesus* state their

conclusion after a scientific investigation of a fragment from the Gospel of Matthew. The scientific evidence revealed that the book was written before A.D. 70, possibly as early as A.D. 30.{6} This reveals the fact that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, who were then able to judge the accuracy of such accounts, and they were unable to refute Jesus' miracles. None of the world's religious leaders performed the miracles Jesus did.

Authority Over Death

A study of the claims of Jesus make it clear that He was professing to be God. It is then impossible to conclude that He was merely a good teacher. In light of these claims, one must conclude that He is a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. We investigated to see if His claim to be God was substantiated. Clearly the record of prophecy proved there was something unique about Him. The miracles He performed remain unequaled by anyone, but Jesus' greatest demonstration of authority is revealed in His power over sin and death.

There are many religions and religious leaders who claim to know what lies beyond the grave. The problem is, no one has demonstrated authority over the grave or confirmed their belief of what happens after death. Only Jesus demonstrated authority over death. All men have died, but Jesus is alive.

During His three-year ministry, Jesus exercised His authority over death by raising several people from the grave. Most notable is the account of Lazarus found in John 11. Here even in the face of His enemies, Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. If this were not a historical account, this story would not have survived since it was recorded and propagated in the very city where it occurred, in the lifetime of the witnesses, both followers and enemies of Christ. The enemies of Christianity could have easily refuted the account if it were not true. The fact is they could not refute it.

In regard to His own death and resurrection, the Old Testament predicted the death of the Messiah in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. However, it also predicts the resurrection in Psalm 16:8 11 and refers to the eternal reign of the Messiah. The only way to reconcile these verses is a resurrected Messiah.

Jesus himself made these predictions in regard to His resurrection: "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up" (John 2:19). In Mark 8:31 Jesus taught "that the son of Man must suffer many things . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again." In John 10:18 Jesus states, "I have authority to lay it (My life) down, and I have authority to take it up again." In these passages, Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection. Either Jesus was mad, or He really had the authority over death.

Jesus' resurrection proved His authority over sin and death. For a more detailed defense of the historicity of the Resurrection, check the Probe perspective on the Resurrection titled, Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

At the beginning of this study we examined the claims of Christ. We realized only three conclusions were possible: liar, lunatic, or Lord. Since the first two were inconceivable, we needed to see if Christ could further confirm His credentials of being God. We discovered that His claims were confirmed by the record of prophecy, His miracles, and the Resurrection.

Jesus proves himself to be unique among all men.

> *Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this "One Solitary Life."*{7}

Notes

1. William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1903), p. 8.
2. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), p. 167.
3. Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, Ill.:Victor Press, 1990), p. 116.
4. Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Books, 1996), p. 176.
5. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 365-66.
6. Peter Carsten Theide and Matthew D'Ancona, *Eyewitness to Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 163.
7. Anonymous, "One Solitary Life," quoted in Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?*, p. 68.

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God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

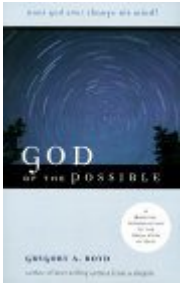
Introducing Open Theism

What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.{1}

Boyd asks the question: "Does God ever change His mind?" He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the

future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. “The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it,” says Boyd.{2}

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we’ll consider Boyd’s ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we’ll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

The Classical View of God’s Foreknowledge

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God’s knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view

since the early church.{3} However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.{4}

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.{5} Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.{6} Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.{7} So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.{8}

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments

first hand.

The Open View of God

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."{9} Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."{10} If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.{11}

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be

known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."{12}

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."{13} Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

A Brief Critique

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold, unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."{14} If God

doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.{15}

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences Himself.{16} Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.{17}

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

Notes

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

2. Ibid., 31.

3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. Emergence, 52-55.

4. Boyd, 32.

5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theolog*y (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology: A Compendium (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.

6. Boyd, 127.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 120.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 126.

12. Ibid., 125.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 44.

15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.

16. Erickson, 206-209.

17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

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What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,{1} both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of

God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."{2}

When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

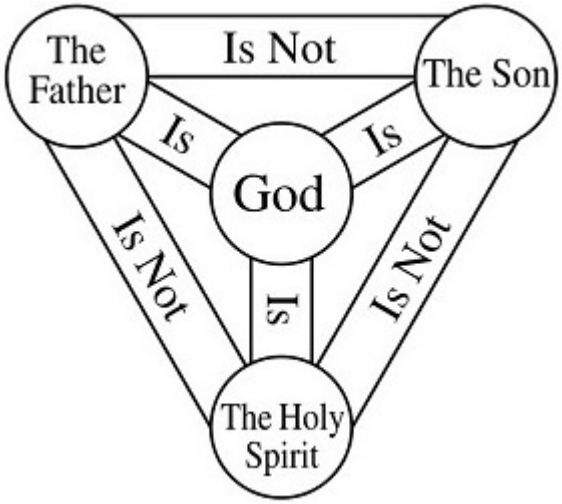
In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the "secret handshake" of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that's a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, "It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is."{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." Another handy definition is this, "Although not itself a biblical term, 'the Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three ‘persons’ who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God.”{5}



Even though it’s short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let’s settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let’s look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?{6} As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this “god with a small g” has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing

collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, "When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level."{7}

The pantheist's commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. "Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning."{8}

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity

since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, “Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God.”{9}

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it’s the only view that adequately describes God’s work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of “God in one person” suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, “God is love,” (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, “In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not ‘big enough’ to

be God."{10}

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, "a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) and God the Father who is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, "[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God's judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious."{11}

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus' words, "when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He "works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God's absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe."{12}

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

The Trinity and the "Everydayness" of

Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

> *Entire sections of the modern church are functionally "non-Trinitarian." I did not say "anti-Trinitarian," for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship.{13}*

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me” (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God’s Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, “Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit ’til the work on earth is done.” That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He

writes, “Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?”{14} Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name” (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney’s words, “Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”{15}—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).{16}

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let’s consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”{17} The

foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father."{18}

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see Worldviews by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy*

Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, God: *Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.
18. Ibid.

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A Conversation with an Atheist

Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.

This article is also available in Spanish.

About Our Dialogue

The Conversation Begins

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a

program I'd written titled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.{1} She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.{2} Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to do that. "I think that if I had faith it would be like his," she says, "but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky."

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There's no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, "What is it about Christianity that turns you off to it?" And she replied, "I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea." Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents

that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me "to explain more personally His relevance." What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

Basic Elements of Stephanie's Atheism

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie's atheism. The first is *reason,* which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as "aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love." It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, "I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded."{3}

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, "I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind."

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science,* which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us "objective, investigable knowledge," she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge "scientistic." There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as

a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."{4}

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

Insufficient Evidences

The Evidentialist Objection

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection."

She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19th century scholar who wrote, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."{5} Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.{6} But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."{7} If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My

view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary. By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: "It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon's interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated."{8} Science can't tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can't tell whether there *are* ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist's paintbrush and pigments and canvas, it can't measure beauty. *Clifford's Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford's maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe¾and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of "properly basic" beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.{9} Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact,

the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn't an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don't require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford's maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).{10} Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing

myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're wrong.

Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

> Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is

> necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

> You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her response was, "That's OK. . . . I'm not looking for universal or eternal meaning."

It's hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer's advice and "take the roof off;"{11} in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn't a nihilist (one who believes that everything is

thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an “optimistic humanist” to use J. P. Moreland’s term.{12} She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot¾adult versions of children’s fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.{13} Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that

it’s true God doesn’t *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, “I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that’s a natural development.” She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don’t, “they are absurd.”

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn’t direct me to. The golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that’s* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn’t change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping with the progress of revelation{14}), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn’t necessarily stand behind Stephanie’s chosen morality, but God—and the universe¾stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil

people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, “I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.’ . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair.” I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that “atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards.” I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I noted earlier, Stephanie doesn’t want to “champion naturalism.” She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with “a frail pragmatism” and even “a certain moral relativism” because she doesn’t have “the absolute word of God to fall back upon.” She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I’ll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let’s turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, “I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, ‘an impersonal universe offers no rewards,’ but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean.” Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientistic approach. Heaven isn’t something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the

world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in "the vagaries of the Christian Heaven," I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one's life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn't lie, and the resurrection of Jesus. We also have the witness of "eternity set in our hearts." (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn't a "cross your fingers" kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ's kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called "fruit that remains" (John 15:16), or the work which is "revealed with fire." (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We're still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don't want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called "methodological naturalism" is risky.{15} That's the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn't necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where

a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of "junk DNA" and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really "junk"? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, "We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose." Finally, Dembski says, "An object that is designed functions within certain constraints." So, for example, "If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us. Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer."{16}

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

Moral Problems with Theism

It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of "the inefficacy of prayer." She has concluded that "hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!"

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the

test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to 1jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin."{17}

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is.* But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

> The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel

> by Joseph Heller, "While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation." . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?{18}

So, while it's true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

Biblical Morality

Moral Character of God

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The "Old Testament God" is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.{19} The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie's favorite biblical enigma. She asked if I would take a knife to my son's throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn't worthy of being called good.

Let's look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going

to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."{20} In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "*we* will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

> They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people

> starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God's part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). "Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way." They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). "Thus God waited for the 'cup of iniquity' to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, 'might know that He was the Lord.'"{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that "the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God." In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften that command at all. But when in God's own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn't change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn't leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

Its Harmful Effects on Us

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can't trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, "The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one's] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That's where the real harm to society can creep in." She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding it own rightness encourages "excesses," such as "holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for their own good." She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. "Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it," she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like "terrorism" bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some "excesses" to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God's goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It's also wrong to let religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."{23} What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists

present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can "see" God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we'll wait to see what happens.

Notes

1. Rick Wade, *The Relevance of Christianity* (Probe Ministries, 1998).

2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.

3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.

4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

5. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.

6. Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," in *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.

7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of

Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind,* rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, S*caling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html.

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil? (Probe

Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

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Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion

Christianity: Religion of Hate?

In the last decade, it has become increasingly common to hear the accusation that Christians are hateful. In the United States, this type of comment has become the mantra of homosexual rights groups who are outraged that Christians would claim that homosexuality is a sin. With the murder of homosexual Matthew Shepherd in 1999, Christians were blamed

for creating a hostile environment and provoking violence against homosexuals by claiming that homosexuality is immoral. Homosexuals often scoff at Christians who say, “Hate the sin, love the sinner,” insinuating that the two cannot be separated. Consequently it has become increasingly difficult to dialogue with these individuals due to their suspicion that Christians, in spite of their expressions of love, actually *hate* homosexuals.

Of course, accusations of hatred against Christians are nothing new. This charge was leveled at the first century church as a preamble to the state sanctioned persecution that occurred off and on throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth century. But today many of those who accuse Christians of hate take their marching orders from their understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche, who called Christian priests “the truly great haters in world history . . . likewise the most ingenious haters.”{1} Nietzsche was absolutely contemptuous of Christians and pulled no punches when it came to his polemic against them. He is infamous for his announcement of the death of God in his writings and was known to be Hitler’s favorite philosopher. Consequently, Christians typically distance themselves from Nietzsche due to his hostility to the Christian worldview.

But while Nietzsche’s writings are often blasphemous, this does not mean that Christians should ignore his insights. Rather than dismissing his critique, we should ask ourselves if he may have something to say to the church. Perhaps we need to be reminded that Jesus’ harshest words were directed toward those who put on an impressive outward show of religiosity, but whose hearts were not right with God. We need only read Jesus’ letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three to see that some of His most severe rebuke is found there, directed towards His own. Unfortunately, one major school of interpretation has determined that the seven churches represent different ages of church history, of which

the first five have already transpired. This interpretation tends to distance us from the Lord's rebuke, as if evangelicals are the praised church of Philadelphia, and the lukewarm Loadiceans are the apostate church of the end-times. It is no wonder that we reject the blistering critique of someone like Nietzsche when we comfort ourselves by assuming that the "gentle" Jesus would never speak harshly to us!

Just as Jesus spoke out against those who hid behind the façade of religion, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is based on the assertion that Christianity is not motivated by love, but rather by a hateful envy, driven by the need for power over others. And since Nietzsche is the inspiration for many today who call Christianity hateful, it would seem that listening to Nietzsche's critique is especially important. By understanding Nietzsche, we can be better equipped to respond to the accusations of hatred against Christians that have become common today. Furthermore, we may find that Nietzsche, rather than being just a cranky despiser of religion, actually has a prophetic message for contemporary Christians.

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota made headlines by claiming that religion is for weak-minded people who are incapable of getting through life without some sort of crutch. The governor quickly apologized for any offense he may have caused, but his claim that religion is just a crutch for the weak is certainly not new. Karl Marx said essentially the same thing by calling religion the opiate of the masses. However, no one has been more creative than Nietzsche when it comes to a critique of Christianity. His contention is not just that Christians are weak, but that Christianity itself was the vehicle by which the weakest members of society were able to overcome the dominance of those more powerful than them. Thus the very basis of Christianity is said to be hatred for, and envy of, the rich and the powerful.

It is important to recognize that Nietzsche was a trained linguist with a deep interest in the history of words. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche claims that the concept of *good* originally was a synonym for nobility and therefore referenced the noble aristocrats of ancient times. At the same time, those who belonged to the lower strata of society, those who were originally referred to as plain and simple, were designated as *bad*.{2} Nietzsche's point in all this is that when we look at the original sense of the words *good* and *bad* they were descriptive of one's social status, rather than being a moral evaluation.

However, it is Nietzsche's contention that this all changed when priestly religions such as Judaism and Christianity were able to attain power in society. He suggests that not only did they transform the conceptions of good and bad to include a moral dimension, but that they went even further by creating the concept of evil as well. Out of their hatred and envy for the ruling elite, and their desire for power, the priests transformed the word *good* to refer to the poor and lowly members of society and had the audacity to refer to the rich and the powerful as evil! When we read the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see how Nietzsche indicts Christianity for this reversal. It is not the rich and the powerful who are blessed, but the weak and the poor! Nietzsche believed that Christ's praise of the powerless was an act of subversion, an attempt by the weak to exact revenge against the elites of society for their natural superiority. As far as Nietzsche was concerned, there was no other way to account for how Christianity had become a major world religion than to suggest that Christianity created concepts such as sin and guilt to cut the rich and powerful down to size.

It was Nietzsche's suspicion that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others. He found Christianity to be especially insidious because, rather than admitting that it desires power over the minds of all

humanity, it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. But in fact, Scripture tells us that Christ willingly became powerless so that human beings might know the power of God. Christ set aside the prerogatives of deity to become a servant; He became poor that we might become rich. Perhaps Nietzsche is correct in arguing that human relationships are often governed by the desire for power. However, it is clear that in the encounter between God and man, it is the infinite God who submits Himself to the limitations of humanity.

Sin and Guilt as Human Conventions

One of most disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is the nihilistic worldview of many of our youth. The horrible assault on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 revealed how deeply alienated many young people are from society. It is apparent that Harris and Kleybold felt entirely justified in killing their classmates out of a sense of outrage at how they had been treated by the more popular students at school. Incredibly, they were convinced that their heinous act would be glorified in Hollywood and entertained themselves by asking who would portray them in the blockbuster movies that would follow their killing spree. What is especially disturbing is the question of how such sociopathic tendencies arise in a prosperous Colorado suburb.

According to Scripture, human beings are sinners in need of redemption. All of us stand guilty before a holy God and only the shed blood of the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can cleanse us from the power and penalty of our sin. Therefore, a guilty conscience can be a positive thing in that it enables us to respond to the gospel message. But in contemporary culture, as Senator Daniel Moynahan has stated, there has been a tendency to “define deviancy down.” Acts that were considered immoral or even criminal in the recent past have been accepted as normal, so that our threshold of what is morally acceptable continues to lower. Additionally, in our

therapeutic society anything that makes a person feel better about herself is exalted, while feelings of guilt and shame are discouraged. In a certain sense, this thinking is part of the heritage of Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche, human beings developed a sense of guilt out of the]financial relationship between a creditor and a debtor.{3} Nietzsche maintained that the similarity between the German words for *guilt* and *debt* were indications that financial obligations were the original source of a sense of obligation toward others. Of course, a debtor is obligated to his creditor, and in ancient times the debtor would pledge some form of collateral in case he were unable to repay the debt. This of course gave the creditor power over the debtor, even to the extent that he could inflict cruelty upon the debtor to extract his "pound of flesh." According to Nietzsche, this gave rise to the idea that suffering could balance out our debts and is the basis for the biblical account of Christ's work of the cross.{4} The problem arose when human beings somehow internalized the original sense of financial obligation, so that what had previously been simply a matter of external punishment evolved into the guilty conscience.

Nietzsche's contention was that a feeling of guilt is destructive and prevents us from acting in accordance with our noble instincts. But the question is, How can human beings be noble without acknowledging their own limitations? The denial of a sense of guilt, the denial of conscience, inevitably leads to pride and the arrogant assumption that we are accountable to no one. While it would be unjust to suggest that Nietzsche encouraged acts such as the Columbine shootings, it is also clear that Nietzsche recognized that a sense of guilt leads us to conclude that we are accountable to someone else for our actions. Wanting to insure that human beings did not conclude that they were accountable to God for their actions, his only option was to conclude that the guilty

conscience is a figment of our imaginations. Unfortunately, incidents such as Columbine are not.

God is Dead! Now We Can Really Live!

Who can forget the famous cover of *Time* magazine, which asked the question "Is God Dead?" Many people may have dismissed such an absurd question, as if it makes sense to say that the eternal God could pass away. But that is precisely the point. In Nietzsche, the announcement of God's death is simply to force people to acknowledge that they no longer care about God. He has been removed from His throne by the advancements of science and technology and has little to say to modern man. According to Nietzsche, God choked to death on pity.{5}

On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that *we* have killed God. It is not that these statements are contradictory, but that Nietzsche viewed "God" as a concept, not as a person. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra setting out to deliver the startling news that God is dead, but his first words are directed to the sun. While to the casual reader this may seem absurd, this is actually a vivid reference to the philosophy of Plato. And according to Nietzsche, Christianity is nothing more than Plato's philosophy dressed up as a religion. The whole point of Nietzsche's philosophy is to deliver us from the teachings of Christianity, which he called the "Platonism of the people." Nietzsche believed that both Plato and Christianity overemphasized the distinction between human existence and the realm of eternity; in order to effectively demolish Christianity, he felt it necessary to destroy the foundations of Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato lived in an era that was concerned about the implications of change. Because Plato denied that we can truly know anything that is changeable, he conceived of an ideal world populated by what he called "forms." The forms were eternal and unchanging models for the objects that we

experience every day, and Plato's concern was with how we can come to know these forms. Part of his answer to that question was his conception of the ultimate form, the form of the Good. The form of the Good is what illumines the soul's understanding, so Plato utilized the sun as the most fitting symbol for this form. Later, some Christian theologians baptized Plato's philosophy by claiming that the forms were ideas in the mind of God, but what critics like Nietzsche find so disturbing is that both Plato and Christianity seem to place more emphasis on an afterlife than on day-to-day existence. It was his desire that we recognize the value and pleasures of this life, but to do so he completely rejected a transcendent world. The question is whether he is justified in claiming that Christianity denies the validity of this life by focusing solely on a heavenly afterlife.

While it is true that a variety of movements within Christianity, such as the monastics, have devalued earthly existence as a mere prelude to the afterlife, this is a far cry from claiming that Christianity *itself* is the religious equivalent of Plato's other-worldly philosophy. St. Augustine, who was a devoted student of Plato, claimed that Plato was a valuable tool that helped lead him to Christianity. But the one thing that he found lacking in the Platonists was the teaching of Scripture that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh. God himself has come to live amongst us! The incarnation of God in Christ means that human existence is vitally important. God himself lived as a man. Rather than devaluing life, Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Nietzsche the Prophet?

As we close our examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking and its consequences for Christian faith we should note his conviction that terms such as *sin, morality,* and *God* are simply human conventions with no reality supporting them. He

hoped to overcome these concepts by taking us back in history to discover how we came to these “erroneous” beliefs. According to Nietzsche, the concept of a God who rewards believers with eternal life has devalued human existence. Consequently, he attempted to devalue any belief associated with a transcendent being or an afterlife and emphasized overcoming Christian standards for morality. His ideal was the *overman*, unique individuals who were not restrained by what society conceived as right or wrong. The problem is that, when taken to its extreme, his philosophy has been utilized to justify a wide variety of crimes. In 1924, two students at the University of Chicago justified their murder of a twelve-year-old boy by quoting from Nietzsche. And of course, Hitler assumed that Nietzsche’s philosophy called for world domination by Germany and the ruthless elimination of all its enemies. Many therefore assume that Nietzsche was some type of proto-Nazi.

Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for Hitler and was not an anti-Semite as some have claimed. These accusations are common, but cannot be the result of actually reading his works. What we can say is that Nietzsche attempted to replace the good news of Jesus Christ with a pseudo-gospel based on the assertion that Christianity was a fabrication that has hindered mankind for centuries. The Bible tells us that Christ has set us free through His atoning work on the cross; Nietzsche insists that such a story is what has placed us in bondage. Like many utopians, Nietzsche denied the inherent sinfulness of the human heart and insisted that the idea of God was what had prevented mankind from reaching its highest potential. Obviously, evangelical Christianity and Nietzsche are in severe disagreement on most subjects.

Still, Nietzsche does have a message for the Christian community. Considering Nietzsche’s contempt for Christianity, that would seem to rule him out as a mouthpiece for God. However, we also note that pagan kings such as Cyrus of Persia

(Ezra 1:1-4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-35) were spokesman for God in particular instances. So to paraphrase John 1:46, “Can anything good come out of Nietzsche?”

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of reading Nietzsche is his emphasis on our motives. Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees for disguising their hardened hearts with outward acts of service and sacrifice, Nietzsche demonstrates keen awareness of the subtle ways we can deceive even ourselves. One of Nietzsche’s favorite accusations is that Christians can speak about loving their enemies, but they have also been known to comfort themselves with thoughts of those same enemies roasting in eternal hell-fire. Perhaps then one of the reasons Christians avoid reading Nietzsche is that he can make us feel so uncomfortable. Do we give to the Church out of love for God or perhaps simply for the tax deduction? What about our service in the church? Are we motivated by the applause of man, or by our love for God? The Christian cannot read Nietzsche without feeling challenged on these questions. Rather than simply dismissing his radical critique of Christianity, the church would be well-served to understand how Nietzsche has influenced modern culture, and in turn to reflect on how we can demonstrate the love of God to a dying world.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1967), 33.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 27-28.
3. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 62.
4. Ibid., 65.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

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Putting Beliefs Into Practice

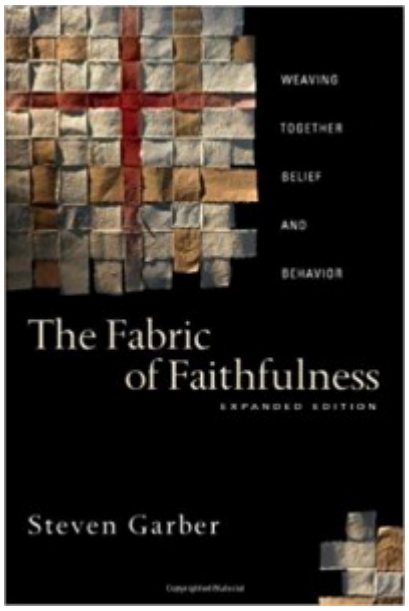
Rick Wade uncovers and analyzes three major ingredients to help students produce a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God: convictions, character, community.

Why Do You Get Up in the Morning?

“Why do you get up in the morning?”

That’s a question Steven Garber likes to ask college students. It might sound like a rather silly question at first. We get up in the morning because there are things to be done that won’t get done if we lie in bed all day. But Garber wants to know something more important. What are the things that lie ahead of us that make it worth getting out of bed? What do we intend to accomplish? Are our ambitions for the day worthy ones? More importantly, How do they fit with our view of life, or our worldview?

Wait a minute. This is getting rather heavy. Should the activities of our day—routine and non-routine—be tied somehow to a worldview? This implies that our basic beliefs are significant for the way we live, and, conversely, that what we do with our days reflects what we really believe.



Steven Garber believes both are true. Garber is on the faculty of the American Studies Program in Washington, D.C. In 1996 he published a book titled *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years.* {1} The purpose of this book is to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By *moral meaning* he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. What do our lives mean on a moral level? "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life? This question and its answer are the heart of this book." {2}

In this article we will look at the three significant factors to which Garber draws attention, factors that form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community. {3}

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable." {4} College students no longer have Mom and Dad looking over their shoulders; their youth pastors are back home; their friends and other significant adults are not around to keep those boundaries in place that once defined their lives. They are on their own, for the most part. *In loco parentis* was the place the university once held in students' lives: "In the place of the parents." No more. One writer says tongue in cheek that the new philosophy is *non sum mater tua*: "I'm not your mama."{5}

Even worse for Christian students, when they are on campus they don't find themselves on their own in a perfectly innocuous environment that seeks to continue in the students'

lives what their parents began. Professor J. Budziszewski, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, says that "The modern university is profoundly alienated from God and hostile to Christian faith." {6} Thus it is that in the college environment Christian students are really put to the test. Given the loss of the support group at home, on the one hand, and the input of new ideas and activities that are antithetical to their faith, on the other, how will they not only stand firm in their faith, but actively move forward in developing a life that is consistent with what they believe?

Before considering what Garber says about convictions, character, and community, let's think about beliefs and practice in general.

Telos and *Praxis*

Many students think of the college years as their chance to finally break loose of the constraints of home and have a good time—a *really* good time—before settling down into the hum-drum routine of adult life. They see education simply as a means for getting good jobs. Thus, academics are too often governed by the marketplace. Students who try to discuss ideas and issues outside the classroom are often put down by their peers. The attitude seems to be to do just enough to get the grades, and let the party begin! {7}

Is this why we send our children to college? Just to get good grades to get good jobs? For the Christian student this question is ever so vital.

Hear how Jacques Ellul expands the message of Ecclesiastes chapter 12:

> Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! Then it is not too

> late for your salvation, but too late for you to serve as the presence of God in the midst of the world and the creation. You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you. {8}

Students don't understand the pressures that will come with career and marriage and family and all the other ingredients of adult life. The time to think, choose, and begin acting is when the possibilities still lie open before them.

Steven Garber uses two Greek words to identify the two aspects of life which must be united: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the Greek word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It isn't just the end in the sense of the final moment in time; it is the goal, the culmination, the final form that gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal that defines all human life is the time when Christ will return and reign forever and believers will be conformed to His image completely. This *telos* or goal should govern our actions. In fact, the adjectival form of the word, *teleios*, is the word Paul and James use when they call us to be perfect or complete (Col. 1:28; James 1:4).

Garber's second word, *praxis*, means action or deed. {9} In Matthew 16:27, for example, Jesus speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is whether we are ordering our *praxis* in keeping with our *telos*. Does the end toward which we are heading as children of God define the activities of our lives?

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there *is* no *telos*, no end toward which everything is moving. Westerners no longer even look for the perfection of man, as in modernism. College students are told in so many different ways that their lives are either

completely open—the "freedom" of existentialism, or completely determined—in which case freedom is an illusion. So either there is nothing bigger than us to which we might aspire, or we're just being carried along by forces we can't control. In either case, how are students to make any sense of their lives in general or their studies in particular? Emotivism and pragmatism rule. We choose based upon our own feelings or desires—which can change frequentlyor in accordance with what works or both. And what "works" is what gives them the best chance in the marketplace. Is there anything bigger that should give students a focus for their studies and their lives?

Convictions—The Foundation of Basic Beliefs

Foundational to how we live is the body of basic beliefs we hold. I noted earlier Garber's use the words *telos* and *praxis* to refer to the end toward which we are moving and the practice or deeds of our lives. The matter of *telos* or end points to the content of our faith, or our worldview, which forms our basic convictions. Let's look more closely at the importance of convictions.

When we think of our end in Christ we're thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Here's how J. B. Lightfoot puts it. It speaks of "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ." {10} It is the *telos* or end of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

This isn't mere philosophical or theological speculation, however, for we have the reality of the historical presence of

God in Christ on earth which gave evidence of the truth of these beliefs of a sort we can grasp. This is so important in our day of religious pluralism, an approach to religion that abstracts ideas from various religions in the search for ultimate truth. Christianity isn't an abstract set of beliefs; it is true religion grounded in objective, historical events. Historical events and revealed meanings provide the objective ground for our convictions. And these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live.

It is critical, then, for students to understand Christian doctrine thoroughly and its meaning and application to the various facets of life.

This whole matter of doctrine grounded in historical fact is troublesome in itself today because there has been a rift created between fact and value. Facts are those things that can be measured scientifically. All else, especially religion and morality, is considered value; it is subjective and varies according to personal preference, culture, etc. Students are told that their most basic beliefs are "noncognitive emotional responses or private subjective preferences." {11} They are told that it doesn't matter whether what they believe is objectively true; all that matters is whether it is meaningful to them. But as Garber notes, "What is real?' informs What is true?' which informs What is right?'" {12} Our beliefs and actions find their ultimate meaning—apart from how we might feel about them—in the fact that they are based on reality.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who, among other things, served on President Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach was raised in a Christian home, but sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says:

> Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While

> there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true. {13}

Likewise, when some of Jesus' disciples left Him, He asked those who remained if they would leave also. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). It was what Peter believed that kept him close to Jesus when circumstances called for retreat.

What we believe gives meaning to our existence; it provides an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and it gives broad direction for our lives. For a student to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know what Christianity is, and be convinced that it is "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put it: the really true.

Character—Living One's Beliefs

So convictions grounded in reality are significant for the way we live. But convictions alone aren't enough in the Christian life. They need to be matched by character that is worthy of the One who redeemed us, the One whom we represent on earth. It can be hard for students, though, to feel encouraged to develop Christ-like character given the attitudes of people all around them.

Steven Garber sees the TV show *Beavis and . . .* (well, that other guy) as symptomatic of the attitude of many young people today. He quotes a Harvard student who described the show this way: "Two teenaged losers . . . mindlessly watch videos, and they snicker. . . . [They] help us understand what the next century will be like. The founding principle will be nihilism. Rampant disregard for other living things . . . will be in. Taking responsibility for one's actions will be out. . . .

It’s proof that there is a whole new generation out there that completely understands all of this society’s foibles. And can only snicker.” {14}

How shall we inspire our students to develop character in keeping with their convictions so they don’t end up “getting all A’s but flunking life,” in Walker Percy’s words? {15} How can we turn them away from the destructiveness of a nihilistic worldview in which nothing has meaning?

Having abandoned the Christian *telos* our society is characterized by “an ethic of emotivism, one which asserts that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference.'” {16} This goes back to the split between fact and value I spoke of earlier. Values are person-centered; they have no force beyond the individual’s power to live them out and impose them on others. They aren’t grounded in anything more ultimate than an individual or at best a particular society.

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

> Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed¾the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing. {17}

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral

meaning. The idea of a “cosmos without purpose,” says Garber, “is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world.” {18} It provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways, and who will call us to give an account in the end.

Bob Kramer was a campus leader for student protest at Harvard in the ’60s. He wanted to bring about social change, but when he discovered in his classes that his basic beliefs about right and wrong, truth and justice were wrong, he dropped out. “There was no real foundation for what I believed,” he says, “beyond that I believed it.” {19}

If we accept that Christianity does indeed provide direction and firm foundations for the development of character in the individual, still we must ask how that development comes about. Can we expect students to just read the Bible and go out and live Christianly? For Steven Garber, this leads us to consider the importance of a mentor, a person under whom the student can learn how to live as a person of high moral character.

Garber tells the story of Grace Tazelaar who graduated from Wheaton College and then went into nursing. She then taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, “This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service. At the core of her teacher’s life, Grace recalls, I saw much love amidst trauma.'” “Those lessons,” says Garber, “cannot be taught from a textbook; they have to be learned from a life.” {20}

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed

Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that, "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." {21} Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

The development of moral character was once an integral part of education. Christians must once again seek the development of the whole person in education. That means, on the one hand, finding adults who are willing to become mentors for students, and, on the other, drawing students out and interesting them in forming significant relationships with adults, whether they be relatives, professors, pastors, or perhaps professionals in their fields of interest. This involves more than teaching students how to have quiet times. The kind of pietistic Christianity which pulls into itself to simply develop one's own spiritual experience won't do if we're to have an impact on our world. Students need to be shown how to apply the "do not's" in Scripture, but also how to find the "do's" and . . . well, do them. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves in Jesus' name to a world in need using their own gifts and personalities.

Community—Finding and Giving Support

If convictions provide our foundations and our instructions, mentors can be our guides as we see in them how those convictions take shape in someone's life. Community, the third element, then provides a context within which to practice . . . our practice!

Garber notes that "community is the context for the growth of convictions and character. What we believe about life and the world becomes plausible as we see it lived out all around us. This is not an abstraction, though. Its reality is seen in time and space, in the histories and circumstances of real

people living real lives." Working together with other believers "allows for young people to make stumbling and fumbling choices toward a *telos* whose character is not altogether known at the time; it also allows for grace, which is always a surprise." {22}

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? When Donald Guthrie, who has worked with the Coalition for Christian Outreach, was asked what makes it hard to connect beliefs with life's experience, he replied, "The cynical nature of our culture, as it permeates the lives of people around me—and me. And only community can stand against that." {23} "We discover who we are," he continued, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning." {24} Bob Kramer, whom we spoke of earlier, said he and his wife believed it was important to surround themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He says, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you live than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself." {25} "My best friend's teachers were my best friends. We were all trying to figure this out together." {26}

The Christian community, if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self- sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid.

During the university years, if they care about the course of their lives, students will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. "Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and

history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about." {27} Says the Preacher, "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth."

Convictions, character, community. Three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God. Students who would put together *telos* and *praxis*, the goal of life and the practice of life, must know what they believe and determine to live in accordance with those beliefs. They should consider finding a mentor and learning from that person how one weaves faith and life. And they should embed themselves in a group of Christians equally committed to living the Christian life fully. "Somewhere, deep in the mysteries of how we learn to see and hear, and what we learn to care for and about, there is a place where presupposition meets practice, where belief becomes behavior," says Steven Garber. {28}

Let me encourage you to get a copy of Steven Garber's book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, both to read yourself and to give to your students. It's published by InterVarsity Press. You might also want to consider how to apply what it says in your church. Let's make it our common aim to help our young people be and live the way God intended.

Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.
5. David Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community: In Place*

of In Loco Parentis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 1994), 140, cited in William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.
6. J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999), 25.
7. For an alarming look at the attitude of students and especially the importance of alcohol on campus, see Willimon and Naylor, chaps. 1 and 2.
8. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.
9. Colin Brown, s.v. "Work," by H.C. Hahn.
10. Colin Brown, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown.
11. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1983), 18, quoted in Garber, 53.
12. Garber, 56.
13. Ibid., 122.
14. Joe Matthews, "Beavis, Butthead & Budding Nihilists: Will Western Civilization Survive?" *Washington Post*, October 3, 1993, p. C1, quoted in Garber, 40-41.
15. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 32, 93, quoted in Garber, 43.
16. Alister McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11-12, quoted in Garber, 50-51.
17. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75, quoted in Garber, 54.
18. Garber, 59.
19. Ibid., 61.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Inge Jens, ed. *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), xi, quoted in Garber, 167.
22. Garber, 146.

23. Ibid., 147.
24. Ibid., 147.
25. Ibid., 149.
26. Ibid., 152.
27. Ibid., 175.
28. Ibid., 174.

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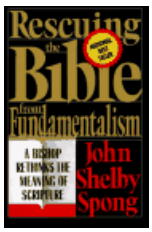
Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.

	Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.{1} The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to "be all that one can be."{2} Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without "religion." In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of "religious" sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

Bishop Spong's View of Scripture

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong's view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there

is “no such thing as ‘objective history’.”{3} The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, “The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God.”{4} In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that “We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us.”{5} He adds that “We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . .”{6}

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-nine pages of Spong’s “rescuing” focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, “Why bother?” If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what’s in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God’s supernatural interaction or

intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

A Sex Driven Gospel

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.{7} Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a

religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system."{8} Spong writes, "So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed." In other words, we are to ignore what Paul actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong's liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."{9} When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring "I'm not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . ." Spong's reply doesn't seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

Who Is Jesus?

Let's turn our focus to Spong's view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ's authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God's only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that "the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated."{10} All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and

eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul "quite obviously was not a trinitarian."{11} Christ is "the hero of a thousand faces" and "many things to many people."{12} "All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ."{13} He adds that, "A Christianity that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying."{14} What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spongs finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is remarkably predictable. He writes, ". . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ."{15} This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God's wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a "terrifying, barrier- free love."{16}

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus' life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong's views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is "self-realization."{17}

Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.{18} Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."{19} It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is

really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the Jesus Seminar and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."{20} Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFranscisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.
19. Ibid.
20. Spong, 4.

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See Also *Probe Answers Our Email*:

"Bishop Spong is a Hero!"

Soren Kierkegaard and the Supremacy of Faith

Kierkegaard—The Radical Reformer

One of the most difficult barriers to evangelism today is the difficulty in defining what it *is* to be a Christian. Some consider attendance in a Christian church to be sufficient, while a vast number of people simply associate "Christian" with being a good, moral person. And in a country such as the U.S., there are even those who assume American citizenship is

an adequate basis for being a Christian. This is what happens when people reject the Bible for its understanding of divine truth.

However, this predicament is not unique to the 21st century. In the mid-nineteenth century, one of the great defenders of Christianity confronted this very problem in his native Denmark. Disturbed by the culture's definition of Christianity, Sören Kierkegaard dedicated his life to a defense of Christianity that was truly a way of life rather than simply the acceptance of a church creed. Kierkegaard was especially disturbed that the Danish church had accepted its definition of Christianity from the famous German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. For Hegel, rationality was the supreme virtue, and Christianity was the ultimate religion because the doctrine of the Trinity was in accordance with his own understanding of logic: God the Father and Jesus Christ are identical since each is God, and yet they are different from one another since they are distinct individuals. This apparent "difference" is then reconciled by the fact that God has made Himself known through the Holy Spirit's birthing of the church. Hegel found this definition of the Trinity to be the mirror image of his own understanding of logic, in which opposites are to be synthesized in order to come to a fuller understanding of reality.

Hegel's reference to Christianity as the ultimate religion led many to assume that he was a strong advocate of Christianity. However, for Hegel, "reality" was only what could be experienced in the here and now. He rejected any suggestion that there was an afterlife or otherworldly existence. And while he referred to Christianity as the ultimate religion, he also declared that religion was subordinate to his own philosophy. Because Christianity is based on faith, Hegel taught that to be rational we must go beyond religion and turn to Hegel's own philosophy if we are to understand ultimate reality.

It was Kierkegaard's self-appointed task to confront Hegel's thinking and to present the supremacy of the Christian faith to the Danish people. His brilliant apologetic effort was so ridiculed, however, that for years after his death Danish parents admonished their children "don't be a Sören" in order to warn them about foolish behavior. In order to understand why, it will be necessary first to examine Kierkegaard's life and strategy, after which we will discuss his well-known works.

Kierkegaard and His Pseudonyms

Few people today know the story of Morris Childs. Childs, who as a young man was a high ranking official in the American communist party, became an informant for the FBI against communism in the early fifties. Because of his background, Childs moved easily among communist leaders, both in the United States and abroad, for nearly thirty years. And yet, due to the highly secretive nature of his mission, very few of his fellow American citizens realized that Morris Childs was a true patriot. Instead, he was considered by many to be a communist, a traitor. Far from being a traitor, Childs had risked his life in order to pass on highly sensitive information to his American spy-masters.

Like Childs in the political realm, Sören Kierkegaard has been misunderstood by many of his fellow Christians. Partly due to the influence of Francis Schaeffer, who blamed Kierkegaard for the modern trend toward irrationalism, there are those who assume that Kierkegaard was a secularist. However, part of the genius of Kierkegaard was his desire to present the truth of Christianity from the perspective of a non-Christian. Consequently, many of his books were written under various pseudonyms.

When reading Kierkegaard under one of these pseudonyms, you can never assume that everything Kierkegaard is writing is his own belief. Instead, he typically introduces himself to the

reader as a non-believer who, for whatever reason, is interested in religious questions. It was Kierkegaard's belief that the most important religious and ethical questions could not be communicated directly. He therefore developed a method famously known as "indirect communication" in which he hoped to establish common ground with the non-believer. By not introducing himself as a Christian, he sought an audience for the gospel that he would not have gained otherwise.

Another aspect of Kierkegaard's life that must be taken into account is his tragic relationship with a young woman named Regina Olsen. Kierkegaard deeply loved Regina, and for a short period of time they were engaged to be married. But Kierkegaard forced himself to break off the engagement. And the fact that they never married was, for Kierkegaard, the true proof of his love for her. Much of his motivation for the break-up was based on the melancholy nature he had received from his father. Kierkegaard's father, Michael, had cursed God as a young boy due to his miserable working conditions and was haunted all his life by the suspicion that he had committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. Not only did Kierkegaard hope to spare Regina from his own depression, he also attempted to demonstrate in his writings that his rejection of Regina was motivated by love, just as God's love for us was revealed through His rejection of His own beloved Son.

Kierkegaard on the Incarnation

The Weigh-Down Workshop, a weight loss program developed by Gwen Shamblin, is based on the admirable thesis that those who would like to lose weight should replace their excessive hunger for food with hunger for God. But recently it became evident that Shamblin's Christian beliefs are unorthodox. According to Shamblin, the doctrine of the Trinity is a "man-made" formula that arose in a polytheistic society in order to "make sure no one mistakenly believed that Christians

worshipped several gods." Shamblin is under the mistaken belief that trinitarian teaching suggests that Jesus and God are the same person, when in fact the biblical teaching is that Jesus (the Son) and God (the Father) are distinctive persons, identical in their divine essence.

In one of Kierkegaard's more famous works, *The Philosophical Fragments,* it is suggested that the doctrine of the Incarnation is indeed the ultimate paradox: How can it make sense that God became man? But Kierkegaard wrote this work under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus. Johannes Climacus does not claim to be a Christian, but he is at odds with the philosophy of Hegel, who sees faith as a stepping-stone to the ultimacy of reason. Climacus is intent on demonstrating that, if Hegel is right, then Christianity is completely wrong. But, if Hegel is wrong, then it is possible to understand that doctrines such as the Incarnation reveal the logical superiority of Christian faith.

Climacus begins by asking if the truth can be learned. He therefore questions what kind of teacher would be capable of bringing the truth to human beings who do not know the truth. Since all people are created by God, it must have been God who made it possible for human beings to know the truth. But since people don't know the truth, then only a divine being could teach human beings the truth. And what is it that prevents people from knowing the truth? It is sin. And since the teacher must bring people out of this sinful condition in order for them to understand truth, this teacher should also be seen as a savior, a deliverer. But, to be a savior for humans, this divine being must also become human as well, which is illogical to those who have not received the truth. All this is to suggest, however, that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is perfectly consistent for the person of faith.

Yet, since Climacus is writing in response to the philosophy of Hegel, he points out that God becoming a man is absurd, a

paradox beyond human comprehension. For this reason many readers assume that Kierkegaard *himself* thought that the Incarnation was absurd, when in fact he was emphasizing that mere human reason was insufficient to be a Christian. For Kierkegaard, biblical faith takes us beyond what human reason can possibly conceive.

Kierkegaard on Abraham

Mohammed Ali was one of the greatest fighters of all time. After he began calling himself "The Greatest," that title quickly became associated with Ali. We often debate about the greatness of athletes and politicians, but rarely in our pluralistic society do we present our position on the greatness of religious figures. And yet that is exactly what Kierkegaard did in his work, *Fear and Trembling,* written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio. Johannes is fascinated by Abraham and desires to understand how anyone could be as great as Abraham.

Johannes is intrigued by a seeming paradox: How is it that Abraham is routinely recognized to be one of the greatest figures in all of Scripture, the father of faith, and yet at the same time we must admit that he was a split-second away from murdering his own son? If anyone were to emulate Abraham in modern times, we would do our best to prevent such a heinous act. Yet, at the same time preachers routinely preach on the greatness of Abraham. Johannes concludes that what made Abraham so amazing was his belief that he would receive Isaac back in *this* life, rather than just in the life everlasting. Still, this leads to the conclusion that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac. How, then, can we exalt Abraham as a great man?

Johannes proceeds to examine the purpose behind Abraham's action. This is where, once again, Kierkegaard is intent on skewering the philosophy of Hegel. According to Hegel, the individual was to subordinate his own desires for the broader good of the institutions of family, civil society, and the

state. Consequently, it would have been Hegel's position that Abraham's actions were both ludicrous and evil since they did not conform with the ethical standards of a civilized people. As a result, Johannes forces us to ask whether the philosophy of Hegel or the teaching of Scripture is to take priority.

Johannes' own unique answer is that, in order to understand Abraham's relationship to God, there must be what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." *Teleology* is the idea that everything has a purpose. For Hegel, the ultimate purpose of ethics was for the members of a state to share the same moral virtue, under which circumstances a nation can be joined together with a common bond. But for Johannes, the individual takes priority over the state. Abraham's actions were guided by a higher purpose than simply conforming to the ethical norms of society. His faith enabled him to obey God to the point of becoming a murderer, while believing that God would raise his beloved son from the dead. Who then is greater? Hegel, or Abraham? Human reason gives one answer, but Christian faith another.

Kierkegaard and Truth

"What is truth?" The famous question of Pilate to Jesus has become even more pertinent today, as truth has become more a matter of pragmatic concerns rather than having any correlation with reality. Biblical Christianity is grounded on the truths of God's Word, and the loss of truth in a postmodern society has had a devastating effect on the influence of the gospel. Thus, on first glance it can be disturbing that Kierkegaard claimed that all truth is subjectivity. To conclude this article, I want to explore exactly what he means by this phrase.

We must be very careful when reading someone as elusive as Kierkegaard. Once again, it is Johannes Climacus who is the spokesman for the claim that all truth is subjectivity. Climacus is again attacking the philosophy of Hegel, who

claimed that it was possible for human beings to possess absolute knowledge through carefully analyzing human existence. Climacus questions how it is possible to have absolute certainty in this life, especially when we consider the wide variance between philosophers since ancient times. More importantly, the claim of absolute knowledge seems to mean that, for the Christian, knowing is more important than believing. Since faith, as in the case of Abraham, often times requires patience and endurance before reaching its fulfillment, there is a qualitative difference between faith and knowledge. According to Climacus, only God can have absolute knowledge. This is important to consider when pondering the assertion that all truth is subjective, for Climacus is making a major distinction between the human realm and the divine realm.

One of Kierkegaard's major emphases in his writings was that the Christian life is more than simply believing in orthodox doctrine. He himself was passionate about his relationship with Christ, and was disgusted by the apathetic attitude of many church-goers. Consequently, when Climacus claims that all truth is subjectivity he is claiming that human beings must appropriate the truth of whatever they believe if it is truly to take hold of their lives. There can be no such thing as a passive, disinterested Christian. Neither should the Christian confuse knowledge, which can never be complete in this life, with the life of faith. The Christian must make a leap of faith, in the sense that faith always involves risk. Climacus therefore hoped to contrast the willingness to believe and *live out* the truths of Christianity against the acceptance of philosophical systems that did not require any personal commitment. This, for Climacus, is the difference between subjective and objective truth.

As we have seen, it is very easy to construe Kierkegaard as a non-Christian if we do not take into consideration his strategy of indirect communication. Hopefully this brief

introduction to Kierkegaard's thought will stimulate many to a fuller appreciation for this important Christian thinker.

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St. Augustine

Former Probe intern Tim Garrett explains that St. Augustine's The City of God *and his* Confessions *reveal not only a brilliant mind, but demonstrate his abiding concern to announce God's righteousness in His dealings with man.*

Who Was St. Augustine?

One of the most remarkable things about a close reading of Church history is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. In the New Testament we find that a man who called himself "the chief of sinners" due to his murderous hatred toward Christians was saved when Christ Himself appeared to him on the road to Damascus. What is clear from the account in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts is that it was not Saul who was seeking Christ: instead, it was Christ who was seeking Paul.

In modern times we see a similar situation in the life of C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy,* he recounts the night that he knelt to admit that God was God by calling himself "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." Like the Apostle Paul, we can see that Lewis was perfectly prepared to be an apologist for the faith, but that preparation occurred *before he ever became a Christian!* It is only after the fact that we see how God was actively seeking the sinner.

In this article we will examine another reluctant convert, a

man whose life and ministry has been crucial to church history. His name was Aurelius Augustine: we know him as St. Augustine of Hippo. But until his conversion, Augustine was anything but a saint! Born in the year 354 in North Africa, Augustine was raised by a Christian mother and a pagan father. The father's main desire was that his son get a good education, while his mother constantly worried about her son's eternal destiny. Augustine indeed received a first class education, but his mother was tormented by his indulgent lifestyle. Augustine became involved with a concubine at the age of seventeen, a relationship which lasted thirteen years and produced one son. Recognizing that sexual lust was competing with Christ for his affections, Augustine uttered the famous prayer "Make me chaste Lord . . . but not yet."

While sexual passion ruled his heart, Augustine sought wisdom with his mind. After suffering enormous internal conflicts, Augustine submitted himself to Christ at the age of thirty-two, and soon thereafter became Bishop of Hippo. Augustine became a tireless defender of the faith, diligent in his role as a shepherd to the flock as well as one of the greatest intellects the Church has ever known.

In this look at the life of Augustine we will focus on two of his greatest books—the *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. As we will see, Augustine's life and work is a testimony to the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Augustine's Youth

In a gripping television interview recently broadcast on *60 Minutes,* the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombings spoke of his grievances against the federal government. During the interview, Timothy McVeigh revealed that his lawyers have filed an appeal that maintains that pre-trial publicity prevented him from getting a fair trial. Like many of us, McVeigh seems intent on avoiding the penalty of his actions; but rather than doing so by insisting upon his innocence, he

is attempting to have the verdict thrown out due to a technicality.

It was truly disturbing to see an articulate young man such as McVeigh coldly dismiss the mass murder of innocents on the basis of a legal technicality. In many respects, his demeanor reflects the contemporary shift in attitude toward sin and guilt that has had devastating consequences for society. As a nation, America has seen a shift from a worldview primarily informed by biblical Christianity to one in which the individual is no longer responsible for his actions. Now it is either society or how one is raised that is given emphasis.

Against this cultural backdrop it is truly therapeutic to read Augustine's *Confessions.* Throughout this wonderful book, which is written in the form of a prayer, Augustine freely admits his willful disobedience to God. Augustine's intent is to reveal the perversity of the human heart, but specifically that of his own. But Augustine was not intent on just confessing his sinfulness: this book is also the confession of his faith in Christ as well. Augustine, as he is moved from a state of carnality to one of redemption, marvels at the goodness of God.

One of the most telling incidents in the *Confessions* is Augustine's recollection of a decisive event in his youth. He and an assortment of friends knew of a pear tree not far from his house. Even though the pears on the tree didn't appeal to Augustine, he and his friends were intent on stealing the pears simply for the thrill of it. They had no need of the pears, and in fact ending up throwing them to some pigs. Augustine's account of this thievery reveals a penetrating insight into our dilemma as human beings. Whereas today many want to blame their parents or their environment for their problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: he *enjoyed* his disobedience.

This reflects one of Augustine's major contributions to

Christian theology: his emphasis on the perversity of the human will. We would all do well to read Augustine's *Confessions* if only to remind us that evil isn't simply a sickness but a condition of the heart that only Jesus Christ can heal.

Augustine's Search for Wisdom

In his fascinating book entitled *Degenerate Moderns,* author Michael Jones convincingly documents how many of the intellectual gurus of the modern era have conformed truth to their own desires. Jones research reveals how Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent trend-setters intentionally lied in their research in order to justify their own sexual immorality. Sadly, contemporary culture has swallowed their findings, leading many to conclude that sexual immorality is both normal and legitimate.

However, when we turn to Augustine's *Confessions,* we see someone who has subordinated his own desires to the truth. The *Confessions* is an account of how Augustine attempted to satisfy the longings of his heart with professional ambition, entertainment, and sex, yet remained unfulfilled. One of Augustine's most famous prayers is therefore the theme of the whole book: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God." Only by submitting his own desires to the Lordship of Christ did Augustine find the peace that he was seeking.

But that submission did not come easy. Throughout most of his adult life, Augustine had been seeking to discover wisdom. But two questions were especially disturbing for him: What is the source of evil, and How can a Being without physical properties exist? Obviously, this second question was a barrier to his belief in the God of the Bible. In his search for answers, Augustine became involved with a group known as the Manichees, who combined Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato. Plato's philosophy helped convince

Augustine that existence did not require physical properties, but he found their answer to the question of evil problematic, and after eight years as a seeker left the Manichees.

Still, the most difficult barrier for Augustine was not intellectual, but a matter of the heart. He eventually came to the point where he knew he should submit himself to Christ, but was reluctant to do so if it meant giving up his relationship with his concubine. One day, while strolling through a walled garden, Augustine heard from the other side of the wall what sounded like a child's voice, saying "pick up and read, pick up and read." At first he thought it was a children's game. Then, acknowledging what he took to be a command of the Lord, he picked up a nearby Bible, and upon opening it immediately came to Romans 13:13-14, words tailor made for Augustine: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine's search for wisdom was complete, as he acknowledged that wisdom is ultimately a *person*: Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God had satisfied his deepest longings.

Augustine's Philosophy of History: *The City of God*

The United States is currently going through what some call a "culture war." On the one hand there are those who believe in eternal truth and the importance of maintaining traditional morality. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the individual is autonomous and should be free to live as he pleases without anyone telling him what is right or wrong. Until thirty years ago the first group held sway. Today, that same group is considered divisive and extreme by the "politically correct" mainstream culture.

But culture wars are not unique to modern America. In the year 410, mighty Rome was sacked by an invading army of Goths. Soon

thereafter, the search was on for a scapegoat. In the year 381 Christianity superceded the ancient religion of the Romans as *the* state religion. This enraged those who favored the old state religion, who claimed that Rome had gained world supremacy due to the favor of the ancient gods. When Rome officially accepted the Christian God and forsook the gods, the gods were said to have withdrawn their favor and allowed the invading armies to breach the walls of Rome in order to demonstrate their anger at being replaced by the Christian God. Educated Romans found such an argument silly, but an even more serious charge was that Christians were disloyal to the state, since their allegiance was ultimately to God. Therefore, Christianity was blamed for a loss of patriotism since Christians believed themselves to ultimately be citizens of another kingdom¾the Kingdom of God.

Augustine responded to these accusations by writing his philosophy of history in a book entitled *The City of God*. Augustine spent thirteen years researching and writing this work, which takes it title from Psalm 87:3: “Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of God.” Augustine’s main thesis is that there are two cities that place demands on our allegiance. The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.

For anyone interested in the current debate between secularists and the “Religious Right,” Augustine’s argument is a masterful combination of historical research and literary eloquence. Christians in particular would be well served by studying this important document, since believers are often accused of being divisive and extreme, characteristics considered by some as un-American.

In Augustine’s time, it was asserted that the values of

Christianity were not consistent with good Roman citizenship. But Augustine's historical investigation revealed that it is sin that is at the root of all our problems: starting with Cain's murder of Abel, the sin of Adam has borne terrible consequences.

Much of Augustine's task was to demonstrate the consequences of a society that loses its moral compass. Augustine took it upon himself to demonstrate the falsity of the assertion that the Christian worldview is incompatible with civic life. Those who maintained that the acceptance of Christian virtues had had a direct bearing on Rome's fall did so primarily from a very limited perspective. The clear implication was that Christianity, a religion that asks its adherents to love their neighbor and pray for their enemies, had fostered a society incapable of defending itself against its more vicious neighbors.

Augustine's response was to demonstrate that Rome had suffered through numerous catastrophes *long* before Christianity ever became the religion of the Romans. Actually, it was due to the respect of the Goths for Christianity that their attack wasn't worse than it was: they relented after only three days. Against those who claimed that Christians could not be loyal citizens due to their higher allegiance to God, Augustine reminded them that the Old and New Testament Scriptures actually *command* obedience to the civil authorities. And any assertion that Christianity had weakened the defense of the empire failed to acknowledge the real cause of Rome's collapse, namely that Rome's moral degeneracy had created a society where justice was no longer valued. Augustine quotes the Roman historians as themselves recognizing the brutality at the very root of the nation, beginning with Romulus' murder of his brother Remus.

Augustine's analysis came to conclude that the virtues of Christianity are most consistent with good citizenship, and then went on to show the biblical distinction between the

founding of Rome and that of the City of God. Just as Rome's origins date back to the dispute between Romulus and Remus, the City of God had its origin in the conflict between Cain and Abel. The City of Man and the City of God have intermingled ever since, and only at the final judgment of Christ will "the tares be separated from the wheat." For Augustine, the ultimate meaning of history will be borne out only when each one of us acknowledges who it was that we loved most: ourselves, or God.

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Justin Martyr: Defender for the Church

Justin's Conversion and Writings

In a previous article I talked about the persecutions Christians experienced in the early church.{1} One of the striking characteristics of persecuted Christians was the courage they exhibited on their way to execution. In fact, we're told by an adult convert of the early second century that this courage was a factor in making him open to the gospel. This convert was a philosopher named Justin, whom you might be familiar with as Justin Martyr. Justin was one of the church's earliest apologists or defenders. Church historian Robert Grant says Justin was "the most important second century apologist."{2} As we consider the work of Justin, along the way we'll see some similarities in the charges made against Christians in his day and ours. Maybe we can learn something from this second century Christian.

Justin's Life

It is believed that Justin was born shortly after 100 A.D. His birthplace was Flavia Neapolis, in Syria-Palestine, or Samaria.{3} Justin's childhood education included rhetoric, poetry, and history. As a young adult he took a special interest in philosophy, and studied primarily Stoicism and Platonism.{4} Justin was searching for God, which "is the goal of Plato's philosophy," he said.{5}

Justin was introduced to the faith directly by an old man who engaged him in discussion about philosophical issues and then told him about Jesus. He took Justin to the Hebrew prophets who were before the philosophers, he said, and who spoke "as reliable witnesses of the truth."{6} They prophesied of the coming of Christ, and their prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Justin said that afterward "my spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. . . . it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Savior's words."{7} Justin sought out Christians who taught him history and Christian doctrine, and then "devoted himself wholly to the spread and vindication of the Christian religion."{8}

Justin continued to wear the cloak which identified him as a philosopher, and he taught students in Ephesus and later in Rome. James Kiefer notes that "he engaged in debates and disputations with non-Christians of all varieties, pagans, Jews, and heretics."{9}

Justin's conviction of the truth of Christ was so complete, that he died a martyr's death somewhere around 165 A.D. Eusebius, the early church historian, said he was denounced by the Cynic Crescens with whom he engaged in debate shortly before his death.{10} Justin was beheaded along with six of his students.

Historian Philip Schaff sums up Justin's character and ministry this way:

> *He had acquired considerable classical and philosophical culture before his conversion, and then made it subservient to the defense of the faith. He was not a man of genius and accurate scholarship, but of respectable talent, extensive reading, and enormous memory. . . . He had the courage of a confessor in life and of a martyr in death. It is impossible not to admire his fearless devotion to the cause of truth and the defense of his persecuted brethren.{11}*

Justin's Writings

Several books have been attributed to Justin, but only three are universally accepted as genuine. They are what are now called the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology,* and the *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*. His *First Apology* was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, who reigned from 138-161 A.D., his sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius, and to the Roman Senate and "the whole Roman people."{12} The *Second Apology* was apparently addressed to the Roman Senate, although it originally might have been attached to the *First*. Both were written in response to persecution.

Justin and Greek Philosophy

Justin's understanding of Christianity was filtered through the philosophy he had learned. The Platonism of Justin's day had a strong theistic bent, and its high moral tone seemed to accord with Christianity. Justin (and others) connected the Logos of philosophy with the Logos of John chapter 1. Historian Philip Schaff describes the thinking this way:

> *The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational. The Logos endowed all men with reason and freedom,*

> *which are not lost by the fall. He scattered seeds of truth before his incarnation, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and barbarians, especially among philosophers and poets, who are the prophets of the heathen. Those who lived reasonably and virtuously in obedience to this preparatory light were Christians in fact, though not in name; while those who lived unreasonably were Christless and enemies of Christ. Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.{13}*

In addition to this source of truth, Justin (and others) believed that the teachings of Moses were handed down through the Egyptians to the Greeks.{14} God was not simply known through abstract reasoning; He made Himself known personally as well as He spoke to the prophets who in turn made Him known to us.{15}

If Justin's idea about Christ and the Logos seems odd, we should keep in mind that we, too, typically understand Christianity through the categories of the philosophies of our day. We aren't completely neutral readers of Scripture.

For example, in modern times science has been considered to be the supreme source of truth. This fed the development of evidential apologetics. This is a method which emphasizes historical and natural facts as evidences for the faith. But scholars have come to see that facts aren't the completely value-free "truths" modernism taught. Other Christians who object to what they consider such an overly rationalistic approach have drawn from existentialist philosophers who are more concerned with the human condition. In other areas, too, we reveal the ideals of modernism in our Christian lives. How many "how-to" books are on the shelves of Christian bookstores? There is a tendency to take a "do this and such-and-such will result" attitude about our personal and spiritual development. Proper technique is a very modernistic notion.

Thus, we shouldn't be too harsh with Justin Martyr. He was a man of his times who did his best to explicate and defend Christian beliefs using the framework of thought with which he was familiar. In doing so, he was a significant force in the development of Christian theology and apologetics in the early church.

Justin's Apologetics

Christians Treated Unfairly

In his two Apologies, Justin's primary goal was to defend *Christians* rather than *Christianity per se*.{16} Christians were being treated unfairly; Justin's ambition was to get fair treatment for them. Persecution had advanced to the point where Christians were worthy of judgment just for bearing the name *Christian*. Their odd worship habits, their refusal to participate in the civic cults and in emperor worship, and their strange beliefs were enough to create a general bias against them. Thus it was that under some emperors and local governors Christians could be brought to trial just for bearing the name.

Christians and Atheism

Part of the problem was a misrepresentation of Christian beliefs. Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists. Justin asked how they could be atheists since they worshipped "the Most True God." Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and "pay homage to them in reason and truth." Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, but they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter but were honored by governmental leaders. {17}

Christians and Citizenship

Another accusation against Christians was that they were enemies of the state. Their lack of participation in pagan religious rituals, which were a part of everyday public life during those days, and their talk about belonging to another kingdom led to charges that they weren't good citizens. Justin responded they weren't looking for an earthly kingdom, one that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn't go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that "we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace," because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives.{18} "Only God do we worship," he said, "but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men."{19} As a specific example of being good citizens, Justin cited that Christians are faithful in paying taxes because Jesus said they should (Matt. 22:20-21). Justin's general argument was that by living virtuous lives, something highly regarded in Greek philosophy, Christians were by conviction good citizens.

The Situation Today

Does this kind of situation sound familiar to you? Today, bearing the name *fundamentalist* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, close-minded, and certainly harmful to society.{20} If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting red in the face and sinking to the level of name-calling in response, but by setting forth what we really believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren't harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further and show how the morality of our day is harmful to society. This might be persuasive to some, but certainly not on everyone, maybe not on most. But in

clarifying what we believe and why we believe it, we will strengthen the church, and this is important if, as I think, believers are weakened more through name-calling and ostracism than through attacks on doctrine.

Christianity as Moral

In addition to being called enemies of the state and atheists, Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. For example, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character.

For one thing, Justin said, Christians demonstrated their honesty by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They loved truth more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies.

This attitude of living according to truth was one example of the change brought about in people's lives following their conversion. One writer notes that this change came to be known as "the triumphal song of the Apologists."{21} Justin said:

> *We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly. . . .{22}*

Justin also emphasized the chaste behavior of Christians, in

response to accusations of immoral behavior during worship. To show how far that was from the truth, he told the story of a young man who asked that a surgeon make him a eunuch to prove that Christians do not practice promiscuity. The request was denied, so the young man chose to remain unmarried and accountable to fellow believers.{23}

One of Justin's apologetical tactics was to contrast what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for it, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of men and animals on their idols. Christians were accused of sexual immorality, but it was their critics, Justin said, who imitated "Jupiter and the other gods in sodomy and sinful relations with women."{24}

Today, Christians who oppose abortion are said to hate women. Those who believe that homosexuality is wrong are called hate-mongers. When we try to present our case as Justin did it can be hard to get a hearing. This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to clarify our beliefs or even to show how critics can be as immoral as they accuse Christians of being.{25} What we need to remember is that a clarification of Christian teachings isn't enough. It wasn't in Justin's day. Consider the means he listed by which people were brought to Christ. He said that many were "turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters."{26} Christians' high moral character, even though often maligned, is a powerful witness and apologetic for the faith.

Justin's Case for Christ

As part of his defense of Christians before the Emperor and Roman Senate, Justin also argued that Christianity was true. This was important because reason and the pursuit of truth were highly valued by the Roman intelligentsia. Since one of the charges against Christians was that they held superstitious beliefs, it had to be shown that their beliefs were reasonable. Let's consider Justin's central case for the truth of Christianity, namely, that the coming of Christ—the Logos of God—was foretold through the Prophetic Spirit thousands of years in advance.

Eternal Logos

Earlier I spoke of how Christ was identified with the Logos—the locus of reason in the universe—of which the philosophers spoke. Speaking of Him in these terms would help gain a hearing from the cultured classes of his day. As one historian noted, "Whenever [the Logos] was mentioned the interest of all was at once secured."{27} It was important to show the reasonableness of the faith, and the Logos was the locus of reason in major schools of Greek philosophy. To quote Philip Schaff again, "Christianity is the highest reason," for Justin. "The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational."{28} In addition to guaranteeing the rationality of Christianity, identifying Jesus as the Logos indicated His antiquity, which was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief. I should note here that this emphasis on reason should not leave us thinking that faith meant nothing for Justin. He repeatedly refers to faith in his apologies. He speaks of us being made whole "by faith through the blood and the death of Christ."{29} He even refers back to Abraham who "was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in Him."{30} However, even here the matter of

knowledge is central because Justin put more weight on believing in the teachings of Christ than on believing in Christ himself. *Fulfilled Prophecies* But why should this claim about Jesus be believed? The reason was that He was the fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years earlier which proved that He wasn't just a man who could do magic, but the promised Son of God. "We are actual eye-witnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were fortold [sic]," he said.{31} Justin summarized the Old Testament prophecies about Christ this way:

> *In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called and actually being the Son of God. And that He would send certain persons to every nation to make known these things, and that the former Gentiles rather [than Jews] would believe in Him. He was foretold, in truth, before He actually appeared, first five thousand years before, then four thousand, then three thousand, then two thousand, then one thousand, and finally eight hundred. For, in succeeding generations new Prophets rose time and again.{32}*

Not only was the fulfillment of prophecy remarkable in itself, but it was also significant that such prophecies were made long before the Greek philosophers, for, unlike today, antiquity was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief.

Conclusion

For all the weaknesses in his theology and apologetics, Justin Martyr provides an example of those who took their faith very seriously in the early church, and who sought to be a mouthpiece for the Lord and a defender of His people. Schaff

says that "[Justin's writings] attest his honesty and earnestness, his enthusiastic love for Christianity, and his fearlessness in its defense against all assaults from without and perversions from within."{33} While it might seem to us that Christianity was really just philosophy to Justin, historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that Justin's faith was fed more by what the church confessed about Christ than by his own philosophical speculation. "He was, after all, ready to lay down his life for Christ; and his martyrdom speaks louder, even doctrinally, than does his apologetics."{34}

Notes

1. Rick Wade, Persecution in the Early Church, Probe Ministries, Sept. 1999.

2. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.

3. *Justin Martyr, First Apology, in Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 33.

4. James E. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr, Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr," justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html.

5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 151.

6. Ibid., 159.

7. Ibid., 160.

8. Philip Schaff, Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325, vol. II in *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 714.

9. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr."

10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “St. Justin Martyr.” www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm. See also Justin’s own prediction of his betrayal in *The Second Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 122-23.

11. Schaff, 715.

12. Justin, *First Apology*, 33.

13. Schaff, 723.

14. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, s.v. “Platonism and Neoplatonism,” by A. Hilary Armstrong. See also Justin, *First Apology*, 81.

15. *Catholic Encyclopedia.*

16. Robert Grant believes it was the martyrdom of Polycarp in Rome which prompted Justin to write to the emperor. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 53.

17. Justin, *First Apology*, 37-39.

18. Ibid., 43-44.

19. Ibid., 52.

20. The reader might want to see my article *Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society*.

21. Thomas B. Falls, in Justin, *First Apology*, 47, note 2.

22. Justin, *First Apology*, 47.

23. Ibid., 65.

24. Ibid., 133.

25. This kind of discussion can be difficult in general because of the moral relativism of our day. A good book to read which shows that Americans aren’t as relativistic as they

seem to think is William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996). For a summary presentation of Watkins' ideas, see my article *The New Absolutes*.

26. Justin, *First Apology*, 50.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, quoted in J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 46.

28. Schaff, 723.

29. Justin, *Dialogue*, 166.

30. Ibid., 183.

31. Justin, *First Apology*, 66.

32. Ibid., 68.

33. Schaff, 719.

34. Pelikan, 143.

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