Worldviews, Part 2 – Comparing Postmodernism and Other Worldviews with a Christian View

Rick Wade adds to our understanding of worldviews by adding three classical and one very current life perspective to our worldview discussion. Understanding how deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism address the fundamental worldview questions helps us to deeply understand their similarities and differences with Christian theism.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Introduction

A few years ago, former Probe staff member Jerry Solomon wrote an article on worldviews in which he provided a basic introduction to the subject, and then gave a sketch of three major worldviews: Christian theism, naturalism, and New Age pantheism.{1} In this article we'll look at four more worldviews: deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism. We frequently refer to these various philosophies in our articles, so it seems good to give a brief description for reference.{2}

Worldviews: Some Basics

What is a worldview? James Orr, the 19th century church historian, said that a worldview "[denotes] the widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology."{3} A developed worldview supplies answers to the questions of origin, purpose, and destiny among

other things, or as some put it, the "why, whence, and whither" of things.{4}

But some may object that such a view of Christianity is too intellectual or esoteric, or might say that Christianity by its very nature doesn't allow being forced into some set of philosophical ideas. It's true that one can present an overly philosophical picture of Christianity, one that makes it seem very remote from real life. But does that invalidate the cognitive element? Note that the apostle Paul had no problem with considering the rational aspect of the faith. There must be knowledge of Christianity in order to live it out. Read Eph. 1:17,18.{5} In Colossians we see how Paul gave his readers intellectual grounds for rejecting the philosophy of the day (cf. 1:9ff).

There are a couple of reasons for thinking of Christianity in worldview terms. Over a hundred years ago church historian James Orr called for such a perspective because first, Christianity *does* involve a lot of interconnected beliefs which cannot be picked and chosen in a cafeteria-style fashion. He says, "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a '*Weltanschauung*,' or 'Christian view of the world,' which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint."{6} Christianity, thus, by its nature forms a worldview.

Second, Orr says, since Christianity as a whole is under attack, it must be defended as a whole; not just as individual doctrines but the whole concept of supernatural, revealed religion. "The opposition which Christianity has to encounter," says Orr, "is no longer confined to special doctrines or to points of supposed conflict with the natural

sciences—for example, the relations of Genesis and geology—but extends to the whole manner of conceiving of the world and of man's place in it, the manner of conceiving of the entire system of things, natural and moral, of which we form a part."{7}

Evaluating Worldviews

How shall we evaluate a worldview? We have every right to expect that a true description of reality will be rational, be supported by evidence, provide the widest explanation for all of reality, and accord with human experience. Regarding its rational nature, it must both not contradict itself and be coherent as a system. Regarding evidence, it must not only be consistent with and explain the facts of nature and history, but it must give an adequate explanation for special occurrences in history (I'm thinking here specifically of the person and work of Jesus, including His life, death, and resurrection). A worldview answers the "why" question in its ability to explain what we see around and within ourselves. Regarding human experience, it must both explain what we know of ourselves *and* answer our deepest longings and aspirations.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised at supernatural elements such as miracles and prophecies, and reports of such should withstand investigation as far as we're able.

Finally any truths revealed which couldn't be known otherwise—even though transcending what we can know on our own and being difficult to understand—should not conclusively contradict what we know in the range of human experience.

Let's turn now to a consideration of our four worldviews.

Deism

Historical background

The era called the Enlightenment, which spanned the 17th and

18th centuries, saw significant changes in the way Western man viewed his world. The flowering of knowledge in the Renaissance which broke through in the arts and sciences led to the restoration of a high view of man. Even in the Christian church there developed something called "Christian humanism." In the Enlightenment era which followed, though, the "Christian" part began to fall off, leaving man as the final authority on all that is true. But this change didn't occur overnight. There was a period of time when God was still recognized, although some believed He had lost touch, as it were, with His creation. He was pushed out and restricted to His heaven. Notions of God's providential care over the earth faded away. Thus was born deism, the first of four worldviews.

Several factors were involved in this transition. One was the flowering of science, specifically Newtonian physics, which supposedly gave a rational, orderly explanation of the world, thereby removing the mysterious, supernatural elements. Another factor was the religious wars a century or two before which had a souring effect on people's attitudes about organized religion. Finally, there was a growing awareness of other peoples and religions which made Christianity seem provincial rather than universal.{8} Divine law gave way to natural law. Now there was "revealed religion" coming from God, and "natural religion" discovered in nature. And "natural religion," believed to be neutral and universal, became the norm for what could be accepted as true "revealed religion."

Described

Deism, then, is the belief that "natural religion contains all that is true in revealed religion; where the latter differs, the differences are either morally insignificant or superstitious."{9} There is nothing higher than natural religion. Reason is capable of knowing God and His will, so there is no need for revelation. On the moral side, man's duty is simply to do God's will which is to seek the happiness of all men.

How was it that deists retained belief in God? According to one writer, the Newtonian view of the cosmos seemed to demand a God; the intricate order of the universe suggested an intelligent designer. In fact, this made God seem bigger than ever. However, God was removed from an active part in human affairs. His transcendence was emphasized at the expense of His immanence. Also, although God was the author of natural law, He "receded behind the battery of secondary causes with which men have daily to do."{10} God was seen as too big to be involved in the trivial experiences of man's life. There was no real concern on God's part for the details of our lives and no divine purpose in history. Knowledge of God was "emptied of most of its concrete religious connotations."{11}

Contrasted with Christian Theism

Three major factors separate deism from biblical Christianity. First, God was separated from the workings of real life due to His awesome transcendence. As Sire puts it, "God is distant, foreign, alien."{12} Scripture teaches, however, that God continues to be involved in His creation both in sustaining the natural order (Col. 1:17) and in relating to mankind.

Second, deists saw man as just a part of the clockwork universe, operating according to strict laws. While man was recognized as a creation of God and made in His image, he wasn't seen as essentially a sinner. Gone was the sense of the drama of human interaction with God over concerns about sin and grace and judgment. Man was now in charge of himself. However, he was not truly free for man was locked in the natural system of cause and effect.{13}

Third, because the world was not seen as fallen, but rather as God created it to be, the natural order reflected what was good and right. As Pope said, "One truth is clear, whatever is, is right."{14} Not every deist went this far, however. Ethics was very important to deists; they didn't turn morality over to the subjective realm. But wrongdoing wasn't against

God so much as against some abstract ethical principles discernible in nature.

Internal Weaknesses

Although few if any people would claim to be deists today, there are some aspects of deism which still reveal themselves in our beliefs. For example, some speak of one God who is all-powerful yet not directly concerned with the daily lives of human beings, who is known through the world of nature, but who hasn't revealed Himself authoritatively and finally in Scripture or through Jesus.

However, the halfway position of deism made it incapable of standing as a serious worldview for very long. Deists believed they knew things about God, but they were limited to empirical knowledge; that is, knowledge obtained through nature. If we only gain knowledge from nature, we cannot see the whole picture, and there are certainly things about God which can't be known unless He tells us (which is what revelation is). It would seem that they were presupposing certain things about God learned from special revelation without giving credit where it was due.

Thus, one needed to either keep God in the picture and acknowledge His significance, or remove Him altogether. The latter was the response of naturalism. Since that worldview was considered in the previous article, we'll move next to nihilism, a frame of mind growing out of naturalism.

Nihilism

Now that God was pushed to the edge of human experience, why not remove Him altogether? He had lost all practical value; why believe in Him at all? Thus was ushered in naturalism, the belief that there is only one order of existence and that is nature; there is no supernatural order. This view was discussed in the earlier article, so I won't develop it here.

Historical Background

For many, naturalism was a breath of fresh air, for now one needn't look to religion to find answers. Modern man with his naturalistic beliefs tended to be optimistic about man's prospects for making a good life for himself. Being free from the confines of the supernatural, man was free to make of himself whatever he wanted

Many, however, didn't see the clear benefits of this "freedom." Naturalism produced an emptiness it couldn't fill. Are we really just another stage of evolutionary development? Is this present reality all there is? Is there no permanent, transcendent value in the universe? The worldview—or perhaps we should say, mindset— which emerged was *nihilism*. Nihilism isn't really a philosophy because it doesn't present any kind of a systematic conception of the world. It is more anti-philosophy than philosophy because it is essentially denial—denial of real value in anything. There is no real right and wrong, no beauty, no knowledge, etc.

A name very often associated with nihilism is that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher. Having decided that God was dead, Nietzsche saw that with God's death went the high values of Western man which were based upon belief in God. He also recognized the loss of freedom which this loss entailed. That we are just the natural products of evolution, just materialistic bodies and minds means that there is no real freedom at all. We are determined parts of a determined universe.

Another explanation for the rise of nihilism brings in the social and political elements. After going through many "isms" this century, many people have decided that one simply cannot put one's confidence in any of them, so they simply adopt a basic pragmatism, the idea that workability is all that matters. German theologian Helmut Thielicke made this comment:

> In a world that is saturated and infested with pragmatism, the question inevitably arises whether everything is not "pseudo," whether everything is not—at best—a productive lie, and thus whether at the tail end of this parade of idols there is *Nothing*, a *Nothing* which is always dressed up in some new ideology, but still nothing but nothingness."{15}

Described

Thielicke continues, "Nihilism is not a program but rather a value judgment. It is the last of all conceivable value judgments—at least in any logical series—and to that extent a judgment of death. Nihilism has no other will or purpose; it is content to draw a line and call it quits."{16}

James Sire mentions *Breath*, a play by Samuel Beckett, as a prime example of nihilism in theater. There are no actors, just a pile of rubbish on the stage. The light on the stage dims, then brightens, then dims again. "There are no words, only a 'recorded' cry opening the play, an inhaled breath, an exhaled breath and an identical 'recorded' cry closing the play. For Beckett life is such a 'breath.'"{17}

Nihilism, then, is a philosophy of loss; those who toy with it as a trendy worldview either don't understand it or haven't tried to. As one writer said, "Nietzsche replaces easy-going atheism with agonized atheism."{18}

Contrasted with Christian Theism

Nihilism is obviously out of accord with Christian doctrine. God is *not* dead, and His nature and will provide a structure for value and meaning which transcend us. Because God is active in the world and is working to bring about His plans, there is real basis for hope. *Internal Weaknesses*

Nihilism also has its own internal weaknesses. Because it is fundamentally naturalistic, it carries naturalism's

weaknesses. It robs us of any real freedom since the natural order is believed to operate either on a strictly causal basis or by chance (or both). Yet nihilists, like everyone else, act as if they have significant freedom. We are all daily confronted with the responsibility of making right choices and of facing the consequences if we don't. Also, the strict naturalism of nihilists makes their claims to knowledge suspect. If the chemicals and electrical charges in our brains are simply following the physical laws of cause and effect, why should we believe our ideas reflect any reality outside ourselves and aren't just the results of the random activity of our brain cells? Finally, morality can't be simply a matter of "what is, is what ought to be" or else there would be no room for reform. Any charge that another person or culture *ought* to do something—not just because it would work better but because it is *right*—would be illegitimate. Nihilism thus leaves us empty with respect to our being, our knowledge, and our morality. With all of these goes a loss of meaning.

But all this is to say what the nihilist already knows! Sincere nihilists haven't just adopted this worldview because they like to be trendy. They are simply reflecting back in their words the way they see the world, and they grieve over it.

How can we respond to nihilism? We can start out by pointing out the existential inconsistencies nihilists exhibit. For one thing, although they say there is no meaning to anything, they indicate what *they* think is meaningful by the time and effort they put into various activities. The art of nihilism, such as *Dada*, for example, attempts to say something; it is purported to have *meaning*. If it doesn't mean anything, it can't convey the image of the world nihilism wants to reveal. Second, all their assertions about meaninglessness are supposed to be statements about the way the world *is*. But if there is no knowledge, nihilists can't know the way the world is. Third, it simply flies in the face of everything our being seems to

require—meaning, value and dignity being three examples.

Very few people can live out a completely nihilistic worldview. The most thoroughgoing cynics will apply themselves to *something*—even if it's small—which they consider meaningful, even if it is crying out against the meaninglessness of life. To feel the despair of the loss of meaning and value indicates that one really *wants* such things. What can the nihilist do? He can take his life so he doesn't have to face such an absurd world. He can keep on living but keep his philosophy of no value and his life of value-seeking separate. Or he can look for something to give life value and meaning. In existentialism we find a worldview which seeks to find meaning in an absurd universe. To that we now turn.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a worldview (or really a collection of worldviews) which holds, in essence, that our choices determine what we are. We create our *own* meaning and value. "Existence precedes essence," it is said. What we do, the choices we make, determine our essence. Existentialists, thus, seek to create their own meaning in a meaningless world.

(I should note here that there are theistic and atheistic forms of existentialism. Here we will only consider the atheistic variety.) *Historical background*

Existentialism has both philosophical and experiential roots. With respect to philosophy, naturalism had left man without God, and the radical individualism and autonomy endorsed by modernistic thinking had left individuals standing alone. With respect to life's experience, technology had made us just another part of the machine; either be efficient or get out of the way, was the modernistic attitude. In addition, some by-products of technology such as pollution and the atomic bomb made life riskier. Then came two devastating World Wars conducted on the doorsteps of Europeans. The result was that

man was thought to be in all alone and in danger. These factors provided the setting for a philosophy of despair. *Described*

Despair is at the foundation of existentialism. We are said to live in "a 'broken world,' an 'ambiguous world,' a 'dislocated world,' a world into which we are 'thrown' and 'condemned' yet 'abandoned' and 'free,' a world which appears to be indifferent or even 'absurd.'"{19} Existentialists refused to accept the solutions coming from reason or nation or tradition. They saw that the usual means of happiness failed people, means such as money, physical pleasure, and fame. Of course, atheistic existentialists refused to look to God. God was dead, not only in the halls of philosophy, but also in the city streets, and man was left on his own.

The real problem, they thought, was a false understanding of the human condition itself which kept people from true happiness. We are alone in a vast and scary universe that doesn't care a whit about us. This realization produces anguish, an interplay between a sense of dread on one hand and the exhilaration of complete freedom on the other. We don't know why we exist or what our destiny is; we aren't told where we come from or given the value of anything. It is all up to us—to *me*—to decide. Even though I can have no confidence that the universe will suit itself to my ideas and desires, I must do something—I must act. I am condemned to make of myself whatever I can. And to be authentic I must be true to myself and my own chosen values above all.

Existentialism, then, is first of all a theory of value. It focuses on the human condition and what makes for a good life. This has made it popular with many who are sensitive to the plight of humanity living in a very impersonal world.

Existentialism proved to be very attractive in this country in the '60s. It gave individuals the "freedom" to toss aside convention and tradition and make their own rules. We see

traces of it in the prevalent notion that we, individually, are the final authorities for value in our own lives, in our emphasis on experience over reason, in our live-for-the moment attitude.

The theme of turning one's back on traditional morality in favor of determining one's own life was seen in the movie *Pleasantville,* the story of two young people who are transported into the world of *Pleasantville,* a black and white TV show. Their lives only turn into color when they begin to express their sexuality. The girl eventually finds herself in the healthy area of academics, but this is a choice *she* alone makes; she is in charge of her own existence. *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

The contrasts between atheistic existentialism and Christianity are obvious. The Bible teaches that we *do* know where we came from; the universe isn't just some vast wasteland but the setting in which the true and living God is working out His plans of which we are part. We *do* have a source for truth, morality, and values which stands above us. We *do* (or *can*) know where we're going. On the other hand, however, while we do have significant freedom, we don't have absolute freedom to make of ourselves what we will. Neither are we all alone; we have the resources of God to experience rich and meaningful lives.

There's nothing wrong with taking note of our predicament, with noting the dangers to life, and with being resolved to stand firm in the face of a seemingly absurd world. The problems come with believing we are all alone, and that the burden of our lives rests upon us. God has taken on the burden of our present and future lives. We aren't on our own. *Internal Weaknesses*

There are internal problems with existentialism as well. For one thing, one wonders why we should even care if we are in the condition existentialists say we are. Why care about being

authentic, about operating in good faith, as we create our own existence? Why bother about bothering at all? Why not just eat, drink and be merry? Regarding standards of value, how can one avoid the notion that there are some values that everyone should accept, universal standards of good and evil, beauty and ugliness? We can't help believing some things are worth preserving while others are unworthy of our efforts.

With existentialism there is no basis for judging actions or for making the major decisions of life beyond the simple affirmation, "I choose it."

Is that enough?

Postmodernism

It is rather easy for us to consider the worldviews already discussed from a distance. Probably few who read this article are deists or nihilists or even existentialists. These can be safely tucked away in the cupboard of tried and forgotten worldviews by most of us (even though many of us can find elements of one or another in our own thinking). The situation is quite different with respect to postmodernism, the last worldview we'll consider, because it describes the basic mindset of turn-of-the-century Western mankind. We are all immersed in the sea of postmodernism whether we know it or not, and its presuppositions are rooted so deeply in our thinking that even those who are Christians often reveal postmodern attitudes. *Described*

What is postmodernism, anyway? In the 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard presented "a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies" to the Council on Universities of the government of Quebec. This report was published as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.*{20} This book, a standard text in understanding postmodernism, gives a clue as to the nature of this worldview in its very title. Postmodernism isn't really a philosophy, for philosophy

traditionally has been a tool used to understand the reality in which we live. Postmodernists believe that can't be done. So postmodernism is more a condition or mood than a philosophy. In short, postmodernism is a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. But it's also an era, a historical time period which began somewhere between the late 19th and late 20th centuries.{21} In this article we'll concentrate on postmodernism as a mood rather than as a time period.

Historical Background

By "Enlightenment rationalism" we're referring to the ideal of knowledge which was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. It formed the intellectual basis of what we call *modernity*. Two issues were important in the Enlightenment: criticism and power (*criticism* referring here to close analysis). The object was, as one writer says, to free people from "myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature."{22} Truth wasn't found through revelation but through scientific investigation and reason. Knowledge now had to be dispassionate, objective, and certain. Everything now had to conform to the rules of computation and utility; it had to be measurable, and it had to be functional. Reason was in effect reduced to one *kind* of reason, that of mathematics or scientific precision.{23}

Postmodernists believe that when knowledge was reduced to computation, something was lost.

There were several problems with Enlightenment rationalism. First, newfound knowledge gained through science and the resulting development of technology led people to think that man could solve the major difficulties of life without any transcendent help. It was found, however, that reason didn't have the potency it was thought to have. With all our learning and technology, we still didn't have the power we desired over our lives. Natural disasters and major wars such as the two World Wars in this century made people realize that we *aren't* able to fix everything that ailed us simply through reason.

These and other factors such as new mysteries discovered by science served to undermine our ability to really know what is true. In fact, postmodernists veer away from the classical understanding of truth, that is, the correspondence of propositions with external reality. Some very influential postmodernists now espouse pragmatism, the belief that workability is all that can be hoped for. This, I would venture to say, is how many if not most Americans think today.

Another postmodern characteristic regarding truth is this. In keeping with its rejection of the individualistic attitude characteristic of modernism, postmodernism holds that truth isn't found in the workings of the individual mind, but in the group. As one writer noted, "Truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in community and the well-being of the community as a whole."{24} Our thinking like all other aspects of our being is shaped by our community.{25} Politically and sociologically this means, for example, that the individual is expected to conform in his or her thinking to that of the larger group.

Still another problem which resulted from the secularized nature of knowledge and from the loss of confidence in knowing truth in general was the loss of the knowledge of *ultimate* truths. There can be no "totalising metanarratives," that is, no big stories or explanations of the way things are which encompass everything. This can be both liberating and frightening: liberating in the sense that one needn't feel bound by any system of thought; frightening in the sense that we are in the dark about what is true. This is a bit like eating in a cafeteria where one can choose from a variety of foods without having any confidence in the nourishing value of any of it.

A second problem with Enlightenment rationalism was the separation of fact from value. The mathematical mindset of Enlightenment didn't permit the intrusion of judgments about value; that was something separate. What grounds were left,

then, upon which to make judgments? Thus the ethical dilemma of postmodernism: How does one make judgments without having any grounds for judgment?{26} One writer argues that the Holocaust itself was a model of Enlightenment thinking. “In the world of the death camps,” says author Thomas Docherty, “everything was rationalized.” There was the desire to master nature seen in determining which races and kinds of people should survive and which shouldn’t. The process was very orderly and efficient. The tools of technology, also, were used efficiently to advance the Nazi cause.{27} They even used reason as their greatest ally in accomplishing their goals. Thus, the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism could be put to fundamentally evil purposes.

Third, with the secularization of reason in the Enlightenment there developed a growing pessimism about the future. With no transcendent Being to consult, who was to know where history was going? And who was to say whether the direction being taken was truly *progress*? “No longer do we know with any certainty the point towards which history is supposedly progressing,” says Docherty. “Humanity has embarked upon a secular movement whose teleology is uncertain.”{28}

Postmodernism, then, leaves us without knowledge of ultimate truths, with no basis for value judgement, and with no basis for confidence in the future. In general, then, the postmodern mood is pessimistic. How, then, do we know what we should believe and do? With no knowledge of why we’re here or where we’re going to guide us, and no grounds for determining value coming from some transcendent source, people have grown to believe that we must simply choose for ourselves what will be true for us. The *will* is now introduced into knowledge.{29} The questions postmodernists ask are: “What do *I* choose to believe?” and “What do *I* choose to do?”

The postmodern mindset has shown itself in several areas of life. One is a change in understanding language. Language is now thought to be socially constructed; it conveys what the

group says it does. Literature, then, is understood as reflecting the biases of a writer and his cultural group: the writer was obviously saying what would benefit himself or his group. It's up to the reader, then to *deconstruct* the text to find the *real* meaning. Since the writer is trying to perpetuate his will on the reader, the reader adopts a suspicious mindset and looks for political demons behind every tree. Since the meaning of a text is determined by the reader, a text can have as many interpretations as readers.

In art, there was a move to the abstract, because it was thought that we couldn't accurately represent the essence of whatever the object is being painted, for instance. Those things which couldn't be represented accurately had to be presented abstractly. Also, since there are no rules anymore in general, there are none which define or delimit good art. The artist discovers what she's doing as she does it.

Architecture was one of the first areas in which postmodernism showed its face. With the demise of a modernism which always looked to the future, and, again, the loss of any rules, architecture moved from a functionalistic, forward-looking style to an eclectic style. Old buildings are restored, since the past can be appreciated, too. Several different styles can be mixed together. As one writer said, "postmodern design is historically and stylistically pluralistic."{30}

Earlier I spoke of the fact that even Christians espouse postmodern beliefs without realizing it. It is so much a part of the thinking of young people today that even some in the church accept without even thinking about it a "true for you but not for me" mindset. A young woman who taught high school Sunday School at an evangelical Baptist church in Dallas told a newspaper reporter that *she* believed what the Bible taught, but that it wasn't necessarily true for everyone.{31} Perhaps she doesn't understand the claims of Scripture, but more likely she has fit Christianity into the framework of "my truth, your truth." *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Although Christians can learn from postmodernists (especially with respect to the excesses of the Enlightenment), it's important to see the fundamental differences between postmodernism and Christianity. Most importantly, we *can* know ultimate reality because "it" is a "He" who has revealed Himself and His will. The result is that we *can* know truth even though not the exhaustive truth which the Enlightenment thought possible. We *do* have an idea of where history is going, and we *do* have a basis for moral judgment.{32} *Internal Weaknesses*

Postmodernism cannot long survive. Besides being devoid of anything upon which to build a philosophy of life, it also reveals internal problems. While we might like to take an aesthetic approach to truth—in other words, judge by style rather than by substance—we want others to treat us in keeping with universal canons of truth and morality. Also, it is impossible, we now know, to make a clean break between fact and value. Even the most precise and objective scientists must make value decisions with respect to the very work they do. In other words, one project must be chosen over others, and such choices reflect certain values. Furthermore, postmodernism strips us of all stability beyond what our immediate culture can give us. But since even a cultural group can't know ultimate truth but can only choose its values based on a pragmatic viewpoint, there is ultimately no stability in one's cultural group either.

As I've noted, postmodernism is a mood rather than a full-fledged worldview. Something must fill the vacuum created by the demise of modernism. This is what excites some Christian thinkers. For now the door blocking out the supernatural has been thrown open, providing an avenue for Christians to announce the good news that in Christ is found truth, value, and hope for the future, indeed, for all the human race.

Notes

1. Jerry Solomon, “Worldviews,” Probe Ministries International, 1996. Available on our Web site at www.probe.org/worldviews/.

2. James W. Sire’s *The Universe Next Door* (3rd ed., InterVarsity Press, 1997), has provided an almost indispensable guide in understanding worldviews. The choice of views considered in this program were taken from this text.

3. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 3.

4. Orr, 6,7.

5. “[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.”

6. Orr, 4.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Waring, v-viii.

9. Ibid., x.

10. Ibid., xiii.

11. Ibid., xiii.

12. Sire, 44.

13. Ibid., 46.

14. Quoted in Sire, 48.

15. Thielicke, 25.

16. Ibid., 29.

17. Sire, 76.

18. Bloom, quoted in Sire, 93.

19. Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), ix.

20. Published in English by the University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

21. Docherty, 1,2. One theologian of our day sees modernism as having ended on July 15, 1972 when a housing project based upon modernistic principles of functionality was demolished. Still another marks its demise with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Cf. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL; 1994), 27,39. Perhaps this wide time span points to the way philosophies can take years to come to fruition in the public sphere.

22. Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 5.

23. Docherty, 5.

24. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.

25. For more on this the reader might wish to consult my article "Where Did 'I' Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times," available on our Web site at www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/.

26. Docherty, 26.

27. Ibid., 12,13.

28. Ibid., 10.

29. Ibid., 6.

30. Veith, 114.

31. Mary A. Jacobs, “Truths Under Construction,” *Dallas Morning News*, 31 May, 1997.

32. Another major difference is over the matter of human nature and identity. In postmodern thought, the self is lost, whereas Christian theology sees us as distinct individuals with permanent identities (even though we might experience changes in our personalities, vocations, lifestyles, etc.). See my article “Where Did ‘I’ Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times” available on our Web site at www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/.

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Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about “God Almighty.” But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his

private practice on Easter Sunday as an “act of defiance.”

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

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a “wish fulfillment,” he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation’s leading journalists and historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud’s 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn’s first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft’s founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the “painful riddle of death,” Freud once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson’s death brought great grief: “Everything has lost its meaning to me…. I can find no joy in life.” In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer’s pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that

instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God's love, who could tactfully explain the faith's rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology—and history—be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be "Christians" but don't have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. "Christians aren't perfect," reads a popular bumper sticker, "just forgiven."

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth." The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life's most difficult circumstances.

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Where Did "I" Go? The Loss of Self in Postmodern Times

One of the problems with postmodern thought is the loss of personal identity. Rick Wade analyzes the situation and offers biblical remedies for our postmodern malaise.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Who are you, anyway? Do you have an identity? What constitutes your identity? Who your parents are? Where you were born? What you do for a living?

Christians will rightly locate their identity ultimately in the God who created us in His image. We are His creation made for His purposes and glory. But are we important as individuals before God? Are we just a small part of the mass of humanity? Or are we unique individual selves with some characteristics shared by all people but also with a set of characteristics unique to ourselves?

According to the mindset overtaking the Western world called *postmodernism*, you arent really a self at all. You have no unique identity that is identifiable from birth to death; theres no real "you" which remains constant throughout all of lifes changes.

In a previous article my colleague, Don Closson, explored the views of human nature held by theists, pantheists, and naturalists. In this article I want to examine the postmodern view of human nature and consider a possible direction for a Christian response.

Postmodernism: The End of Modernism

What is postmodernism? It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism isnt a philosophy as we typically think of philosophies. It isnt a single, well thought out philosophical system which seeks to define and answer the big questions of life. Postmodernism is more of a report on the mindset of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some call it a mood. We might say it is a report on the failures of modernism along with a hodgepodge of suggestions for a new direction of thought and life.

Modernism is the name given to a way of thinking born in the Enlightenment era. It was a very optimistic outlook buoyed up by the successes of the sciences which produced some truly wonderful technology. We could understand ourselves and our world, and working together we could fix what was broken in nature and in human life.

Unfortunately the chickens have come home to roost; weve discovered that our optimism was misguided. We obviously haven’t fixed all our problems, and the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Reason hasn’t lived up to its Enlightenment reputation.

Not only have we not been able to fix everything, the technology we do have has had some bad side effects. For example, the mobility which has resulted from modern transportation has removed us from stable communities which provided standards of conduct, protection, and a sense of continuity between ones home, work, and other activities of life. Add to that the globalization of our lives which brings us into contact with people from many different backgrounds with many different beliefs and ways of life, and we can see why we struggle to maintain some continuity in our own lives. We feel ourselves becoming fractured as we run this way and that; and at each destination we encounter different sets of values and expectations. As theologian Anthony Thiselton says,

the resulting “loss of stability, loss of stable identity, and loss of confidence in global norms or goals breed deep uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety.”{1} We no longer take our cues from tradition or from our own inner “gyroscope”—an internalized set of values which guides our lives. Rather we are “other-directed.” We take our cues from other people who are supposedly “in the know” and can tell us what we are supposed to do and be in each different compartment of our lives. We find ourselves “eager to conform, yet always in some doubt as to what exactly it [is] that [we are] to conform to.”{2} We are “at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a superficial intimacy with and response to everyone.”{3}

All this produces in us a sense of constantly being in flux. The debate over which was fundamental in our universe—change or stability—occupied the thought of Greek philosophers long before Christ. This debate continues in our day. In fact, one writer noted that “postmodernism can be viewed as a debate about reality.”{4} The search in modern times to find what is really real—what is true and stable—has given way. In postmodern times, change is fundamental; flux is normal.

In all of this we seem to lose our sense of identity. In fact, as we will see, avant garde postmodern thinkers say we have no self at all.

Basic Issues: Truth, Language, and Power

I noted earlier that postmodernism is more a report on the failures of modernism than a philosophy itself. One of the key issues which divides the two eras is that of truth. Whereas modernism was quite optimistic about our ability to know truth not only about ourselves and our world but also about how to make life better, postmodernism says we cant really know truth at all. To mention one way our lack of confidence in reason to get at truth shows itself, consider how often disputes are settled with name- calling or a resort to the ever ready “Well, that’s your opinion,” as if that settles the issue, or

even to force. As one scholar noted, “Argument becomes transposed into rhetoric. Rhetoric then comes to rely on force, seduction, or manipulation.”{5}

Since we cant really know truth¾if there is truth to be known¾we can’t answer questions about ultimate reality. There is no one “story,” as it’s called, which explains everything. So, for example, the message of the Bible cannot be taken as true because it purports to give final answers for the nature of God, man, and the world. In the jargon of postmodernism, it is a *metanarrative,* a story covering all stories. Any metanarrative is rejected out of hand. We simply cant have that kind of knowledge according to postmodernists.{6}

One of the basic problems in knowing truth is the problem of language. Knowledge is mediated by language, but postmodernists believe that language can’t adequately relate truth. Why? Because there is a disjunction between our words and the realities they purport to reflect. Words don’t accurately represent objective reality, it is thought; they are just human conventions. But if language is what we use to convey ideas, and words don’t accurately reflect objective reality, then we can’t know objective reality. What we do with words is not to *reflect* reality, but rather to *create* it. This is called *constructivism*,{7} the power to construct reality with our words.

What this means for human nature in particular is that we cant really make universal statements about human beings. We can’t know if there *is* such a thing as human nature. Those who hold to constructivism say that there is no human nature *per se*; we are what we say we are.

There is a second problem with language. Postmodernists are very sensitive to what they call the *will-to-power*. People exercise power and control over others, and language is one tool used for doing so.{8} For instance, we define roles for people, we make claims about God and what He requires of us,

and so forth. In doing so, we define expectations and limits. Thus, with our words we control people.

As a result of this idea about language and its power to control, postmodernists are almost by definition suspicious. What people say and even more so what they write is suspected of being a tool for control over others.

What does this mean for human nature? It means that if we try to define human nature, we are seen as attempting to exercise control over people. As one person said, to make a person a *sub*ject—a topic of study and analysis—is to sub*ject* that person; in other words, to put him in a box and define his limits.

Thus, human nature cant be defined, so for all practical purposes there is no human nature. There is more, though. Not only is there no human nature generally, but there are no individual selves either.

Postmodernism and the Self

Lets look more closely at the postmodern view of the self.

Writer Walter Truett Anderson gives four terms postmodernists use to speak of the self which address the issues of change and multiple identities. The first is *multiphrenia*. This refers to the many different voices in our culture telling us who we are and what we are. As Kenneth Gergen, a professor of psychology, says, "For everything that we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision."{9} Our lives are multi-dimensional. The various relationships we have in our lives pull us in different directions. We play "such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view."{10} And these roles neednt overlap or be congruent in any significant way. As Anderson says, "In the postmodern world, you just dont get to be a

single and consistent somebody."{11}

The second term used is *protean*. The protean self is capable of changing constantly to suit the present circumstances. "It may include changing political opinions and sexual behavior, changing ideas and ways of expressing them, changing ways of organizing ones life."{12} Some see this as the process of finding one's true self. But others see it as a manifestation of the idea that there *is* no true, stable self.{13}

Thirdly, Anderson speaks of the *de-centered* self. This term focuses on the belief that there is no self at all. The self is constantly redefined, constantly undergoing change. As one philosopher taught, "The subject is not the speaker of language but its creation."{14} Thus, there is no enduring "I". We are what we are described to be.

Anderson's fourth term is *self-in-relation*. This concept is often encountered in feminist studies. It simply means that we live our lives not as islands unto ourselves but in relation to people and to certain cultural contexts. To rightly understand ourselves we must understand the contexts of our lives.{15}

If we put these four terms together, we have the image of a person who has no center, but who is drawn in many directions and is constantly changing and being defined externally by the various relations he or she has with others. All these ideas clearly go in a different direction than that taken by modern society. It was formerly believed that our goal should be to achieve wholeness, to find the integrated self, to pull all the seemingly different parts of ourselves together into one cohesive whole. Postmodernism says no; that can't happen because we aren't by nature one cohesive self.

So there is no "I", no inner self to wrestle with all these different roles and determine which I will accept and which I won't and, ultimately, who I really am. How, then, do changes

come about? Who decides what I am like or who I am? According to postmodern thought, we are shaped by outside forces. We are *socially constructed*.

The Socially Constructed Life

What does it mean to be socially constructed? It means simply that one's society's values, languages, arts, entertainment, all that we grow up surrounded by, define who we are. We do not have fixed identities which are separable from our surroundings and which remain the same even though certain characteristics and circumstances may change.

It was once believed that what we do externally reflects what we are on the inside. But if there is no "inside," we must rely on that which is outside to define us. We are products of external forces over which we have varying levels of control. The suspicious postmodernist sees us as having little control at all over the forces impinging upon us.

Thus, we are created from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. If in traditional societies one's status was determined by one's role, and in modern societies one's status was determined by achievement, in postmodern times ones status is determined by fashion or style.{16} As styles change, we must change with them or be left with our identity in question. It's one thing to want to fit in with one's peers. It's another altogether to believe that ones true identity is bound up with the fashions of the day. But that's life in the postmodern world.

Being bound up with the fashions of the day, however, means that there is no eternal context for our lives. We are "historically situated."{17} That means that our lives can only be understood in the context of the present historical moment. All that matters is now. What I was yesterday is irrelevant; what I will be tomorrow is open.

Let's sum up our discussion to this point. In postmodern times there is no confidence in our ability to know truth. There is no metanarrative which serves to define and give a context to everything. Change is fundamental, and changes come often and do not always form a coherent pattern. There is no real human nature, nor are there real selves; there is no real "me" that is identifiable throughout my life. Whatever I am, I am because I have been "created", so to speak, by outside forces. One of the most potent forces is language with its ability to define and control. My life is like a story or text which is being written and rewritten constantly. How I am defined is what I am. What I am today is means nothing for tomorrow. To empower myself, I must take charge of defining myself, of writing my own story my way, not letting others write it for me.

But for many postmodernists this isn't really an individual exercise at all. I am a part of a group, and I'm expected to remain a part of my group and be defined in keeping with my group. Furthermore, no one outside the group is permitted to participate in the defining process. So, for example, men have nothing to say to women about how they are to act or what roles they are to fill.

Results

The bottom line in all this is what you already know. Life in the postmodern world is one of instability. To quote Thiselton again, the losses of stability and identity and confidence "breed deep uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. . . . [T]he postmodern self lives daily with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust" of all claims to ultimate truth or universal moral standards. This results in defensiveness and "an increasing preoccupation with self-protection, self-interest, and desire for power and the recovery of control. *The postmodern self is thus predisposed to assume a stance of readiness for conflict.*"{18} Our fragmentation, our lack of an

internal “gyroscope” to give direction and balance, the pressures of external forces to conform, the lack of continuity in our lives, together work to strip us of a sense of who we are, or that we are a single somebody at all.

Some people might despair over this. But many believe we should embrace this rather than fight it. If we aren’t happy with our own individual “story”, we should rewrite it. We need to simply accept our inner multiplicity and devise a story that accounts for it. “If meaning is constructed in language,” says one writer, we must learn to tell “better, richer, more spacious stories” about our lives.{19}

But if the forces surrounding us are so strong, how shall we stand against them? If we find ourselves resisting others who try to define us or set standards for us, indicating that we believe they’re strong enough to have an influence over us, how are we ever going to be able to avoid being a pawn for those who are more powerful? How can we avoid get sucked up into “group- think”, where we’re always expected to toe the party line? What happens to our own individuality? Is there no place for our individual unique sets of gifts and abilities, needs and desires, loves and concerns?

Consider also the potential for loss for the individual in favor of the group. What if the group’s standards or goals diminish the individuals in the group? Prof. Ed Veith has spoken of the similarities between this mentality and that of Fascism with its suppression of the individual in favor of the group. With or without realizing it, postmodernists aren’t establishing a basis for empowering the oppressed, but are “resurrecting ways of thinking that gave us world war and the Holocaust.”{20} Veith quotes writer David Hirsch who said, “Purveyors of postmodern ideologies must consider whether it is possible to diminish human beings in theory, without, at the same time, making individual human lives worthless in the real world.”{21}

A Christian Response

Is there an answer in Christ for the fragmented, suspicious, “non-selves” of the postmodern world?

In this writer’s opinion, it is simple common sense that we are individual selves with an identity which we carry throughout our years despite the various changes we experience. “I” can be held accountable for the things “I” did five years ago. The individual brought to the witness stand is believed to be the same “self” who witnessed the particular events in the past. The worker is promised a pension when she retires with the understanding that the retiree will be the same self as the one who worked for many years.{22} Furthermore, we know that we have a set of abilities, great or small, that are our own and that we can use for good or for ill. We naturally resent being molded in the image of other people and prevented from expressing our own true nature.

Does Christ have anything to say to the postmodern individual who cant shake the common sense view that he is the same person today that he was yesterday? Or to the person who wants to affirm or regain her own identity and chart a course for life that she as an individual can experience and learn from and within which to develop as an individual self?

Indeed He does. The call of God in Christ is to individuals within the larger story of God’s work in this world.{23} For one thing, having been created by Him we see ourselves as ones who can be addressed as Jeremiah was with the news that God knew him before he was born. It was the same Jeremiah being formed in his mothers womb to whom God spoke as an adult (Jer. 1:5). Furthermore, in Christ we recognize ourselves as responsible individuals who must give an account for our actions without pointing the finger of blame at “society” (Rev. 20:12).

In Christ we can acknowledge that we are shaped to a great

extent by our surroundings, and that we are historically situated to an extent. But we aren't trapped. Redemption "promises deliverance from all the cause-effect chains of forces which hold the self to its past."{24}

There is more. In Christ the suspicion which marks postmodern man who is ever on guard against being redefined and controlled by others dissolves into a love which gives itself to the interests of God and other men.{25} The will-to-power of postmodern man which is self-defeating gives way to the will-to-love which reaches out to build up rather than to control.{26} We can indeed find common ground with people of other groups. "The cross of Christ in principle shatters the boundaries and conflicts between Jew and Gentile, female and male, free person and slave" (Gal. 3:28).{27} Recognizing our relative historical situatedness should help us to understand the importance of the local church as the social context within which barriers are destroyed.{28} In Christ, then, we have love rather than conflict, service rather than power, trust rather than suspicion.{29}

In Christ we recognize that sometimes life seems chaotic, that there are places of darkness in which we feel overwhelmed by outside forces that dont behave the way we think they should. Consider the experiences of Job and of the writer of Ecclesiastes. But we are called to "set our minds on things above" (Col. 3:2), to put our confidence in "the fear of the Lord" (Prov. 9:10; Job. 28:28; Eccl. 12:13) rather than give in to despair or try to find a solution in simply rewriting our story with our own set of preferred "realities."{30}

Thiselton emphasizes the importance of the resurrection for postmodern man. "The resurrection holds out the promise of hope from beyond the boundaries of the historical situatedness of the postmodern self in its predicament of constraint.".{31} In addition, "Promise beckons 'from ahead' to invite the postmodern self to discover a reconstituted identity." It "constitutes 'a sure and steadfast anchor' (Heb. 6:19) which

re-centres the self. It bestows on the self an *identity of worth* and provides *purposive meaning* for the present." The work of Christ promises a restoration of the individual self which will "once again [come] to bear fully the image of God in Christ (Heb. 1:3; Gen. 1:26) as a self defined by giving and receiving, by loving and being loved unconditionally."{32} As Steven Sandage writes, "The core absolute in life is not change but faith in our unchanging God, the 'anchor of the soul' that reminds us we are strangers longing for a better country " (Heb. 6:19; 11:1-16).{33}

The message of hope is the one postmodern men and women need to hear. That message, delivered two millennia ago, still speaks today. "The word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). Some things never change.

Notes

1. Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 130.

2. Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997), 26.

3. David Reisman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 26; quoted in Anderson, 26.

4. Steven J. Sandage, "Power, Knowledge, and the Hermeneutics of Selfhood: Postmodern Wisdom for Christian Therapists," *Mars Hill Review 12* (Fall 1998): 66.

5. Thiselton, 13.

6. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books,

1994), 49. Note Lyotard's brief definition: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv).

7.Ibid., 47-51.

8. For a Christian's recognition of this in his own life, cf. Sandage, 68-69.

9. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 228. Quoted in Anderson, 38.

10. Gergen quoted in Anderson, 38.

11. Anderson, 38.

12. Ibid., 41.

13. Ibid., 42.

14. Ibid., 42-43.

15. Ibid., 51-56.

16. Veith, 85.

17. Thiselton, 42, 148-150.

18. Ibid., 130-31.

19. Anderson, 56.

20. Veith, 80.

21. David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), 165; quoted in Veith, 80.

22. Thiselton, 74.

23. I am greatly indebted to Thiselton for this portion of the discussion. See chaps. 23 and 24.

24. Thiselton, 155.

25. Ibid., 160.

26. Ibid., 161.

27. Ibid., 43.

28. Cf. Sandage, 72.

29. Thiselton, 43.

30. Sandage, 71-72.

31. Thiselton, 43.

32. Ibid., 163.

33. Sandage, 73.

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The Need to Read Francis Schaeffer

Todd Kappelman provides us with a compelling introduction to the thought and writings of Francis Schaeffer, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century. As a Christian scholar and a visionary worldview thinker, Schaeffer applied Scriptural truth to the issues people are dealing with in the

modern world. He demonstrated that Christ's truth is universal both across time and cultures.

The *Need to Read* series began several months ago with a program on C.S. Lewis . The rationale for this series is that many of the great writers who have helped many Christians mature are now either unknown or neglected by many who could use these authors insights into the faith.

This installment focuses on Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), one of the most recognized and respected Christian authors of the twentieth century. He saw so much more in what he was looking at and agonized over it much more that the rest of us. He was one of the truly great Christians of our time.{1} If this is the case, and I and many others believe that it is, then this question follows: What was Schaeffer looking at? The remarkable answer to this question is all of human history and the long chain of events which have led to modern man as we see him today.

In a time when true scholarship is often equated with specialization in a particular period, people, or subject, Schaeffer was a grand generalist. He was a true Renaissance man who knew something about everything, as opposed to everything about something. In addition to his remarkable and encyclopedic knowledge of human history, he was able to connect important events together such that Christians can see what has happened in human history, what is happening now, and what will happen if man continues on his present course. Schaeffer was a visionary who had an uncanny understanding of the times we live in and what mankind can expect in the near future.

Schaeffers greatest gift, like that of C.S. Lewis, was his concern for the average Christian. He believed philosophy, theology, and ethics should not be reserved for the conversation of learned academics; rather they should be the daily concern of the man on the street. The price for

ignorance of the subjects could be our life, or more importantly, our very souls. The Scriptures are very clear concerning the price of ignorance. The prophet Hosea said that Gods people perish for lack of knowledge.{2} In light of this observation, Schaeffers genius was his ability to communicate extremely difficult philosophical and theological issues on a non- technical level. His writings provide Christians with access to some of the most pressing concerns of our times.

Several aspects of Schaeffers style and sweeping concerns will be discussed in this essay. First, he perceived the wholeness of the created order. There is a basic need in all human beings to know the answers to the great questions of life, and Schaeffer believed that God has given man the answers in the form of natural and specific revelation.

Second, Schaeffer believed that man has a natural inclination to desire the reasonable. Schaeffer argued that the Christian faith is not only true, but that it is the most plausible account for the existence of man and his place in the universe. He contended that an irrational faith is not what God intended to communicate to man.

Third, Schaeffer was one of the original cultural critics of the twentieth century. He believed that mankind, both Christians and non-Christians, was adrift on a sea of irrationality. He further believed that this drift was intensifying to the point that true, orthodox Christianity was being lost.

Schaeffer and *The God Who Is There*

Francis Schaeffer developed some important themes in three of his books: *The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason,* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*

Lets consider *The God Who Is There* first. The major thesis in this book is that modern man has abandoned the idea of truth,

and that has had widespread consequences in every area of life.

In his argumentation, Schaeffer summarizes the last half of the twentieth century, tracing the development of the intellectual climate in Western society. Previous generations had grown up with a basic operational belief that the law of non-contradiction was true. What Schaeffer would have us understand about the law of non- contradiction is this: a statement cannot be both true and false in the same way at the same time. For example, you are either reading this essay or you are not. You cannot be both reading this and not reading it at the same time. Either you are or you are not—choose one.

When we hear something like this, our first reaction is of course we believe in this law of non-contradiction. We believe in it and live by it, even if we did not know what it was called until just a few moments ago. But Schaeffer points out that there has been a gradual decline of belief in this basic principle beginning with philosophy in the late eighteenth century. This first step in the movement away from reason is followed by second and third steps in the areas of art and music. These are, in turn, followed by the fourth steps of general culture and theology. There is much debate about which step came first and who followed whom. The important thing to realize is that after the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe, and certainly before the height of the Industrial age, men in the highest positions of academic and artistic life began to think very differently.

In the first half of this century, Western man began to think in terms of mutually exclusive truths. In other words, we began to believe that two people could believe mutually exclusive truths simultaneously and both of them could be correct. This would be like two people seeing an object and one claiming that it existed and the other claiming that it did not exist. The two men shake hands and say that they are both right in their conclusions. Objective reality is

completely undermined and nothing is true. The result of this thinking is that man begins to despair of his condition.{3} He doesnt know what is ultimately true.

Schaeffers ambition was to help Christians be salt and light in our world. And to do that, we have to understand how people think. Schaeffer also cautions Christians against capitulation to irrationality themselves.{4} In the spirit of cooperation, many Christians are choosing to remain silent when they hear people say that all religions are the same, or that Christianity may be true for one person, but not true for another. Christians cannot afford to remain silent in a world that is embracing irrationality. The unity of orthodox Christianity should be centered and grounded on truth. This is not always easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

Escape from Reason

In *The God Who Is There,* Schaeffers main thesis is that modern man is characterized by his willingness to live a life of contradictions. In the book *Escape from Reason,* he shows how we arrived at this position, and what can be done about it.

Francis Schaeffer believed that one of the great watershed periods of human history occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Reformation was a fifteenth and sixteenth century movement, but it was religious in nature and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Protestant churches. The Renaissance, argues Schaeffer, largely emphasized human reason and the achievements of man. In sharp contrast, the Reformation emphasized the will of God and the authority of the Holy Scriptures. It must be remembered that Schaeffer is generalizing in much of what is said here and that both movements had good and bad aspects.

Schaeffer maintains that men in the Renaissance believed they were great because of the wonderful art, literature, and architecture they produced. The Reformation man believed he

was great because of the God who had made him. Man was made to have a relationship with his creator, but the Renaissance man found himself more and more concerned with the things of this world.{5}

As the emphasis on man increased, the importance of God decreased. This movement was further facilitated by discoveries in the sciences which allowed man to understand the universe on purely naturalistic principles. The result of mans success in explaining some aspects of the universe through reason alone was that he began to try to explain every aspect of the universe through reason alone.

Men found that they were able to explain much through reason, but the larger philosophical questions proved to be too great. In addition, they discovered that there were many questions that could not be answered by reason alone. Some of these questions were: How did everything begin? Why is there something rather than nothing? What happens to us after we die? These questions are traditionally answered by theology, and the answers usually included an appeal to a divine being called God.

Modern man, thus, was faced with two possibilities. Either he could return to the answers found in the Scriptures, or he could live as though life had meaning even though he did not believe that it really did.{6} Schaeffer argued that men in the Western philosophical tradition largely opted for irrational existence, escaping the requirements of reason, hence the title *Escape from Reason.* Schaeffers conclusion to this problem is that Christians must return to a serious belief in the Scriptures and their ability to answer the big philosophical problems, and that we must live our faith consistently in front of the world.{7} In addition, Schaeffer believed that the days are gone when the average man on the street would respond to the Gospel. The language has changed, and we must learn to speak in this new language.{8} We must educate ourselves and be ready to give an account of how

modern man got into his present state of affairs.

He Is There and He Is Not Silent

In the analysis of the previous two books, we have seen that Schaeffer explains the development of modern history and how mankind has largely embraced non-reason in the area of morals. In *He Is There and He Is Not Silent,* Schaeffer outlines a solution for the predicament that faces modern man. He argues that there are three areas in which modern mankind has an absolute necessity for God: metaphysics, morals, and epistemology.{9} These are three areas of philosophy which have to do with, respectively, the problem of existence, the problem of mans moral behavior, and how man can come to a true knowledge of anything at all.

Prior to the seventeenth century, philosophy and theology recognized that they were dealing with the same basic questions. The only difference between the two disciplines was that the former appealed largely to reason and natural revelation, while the latter appealed mostly to reason and special revelation. In the middle ages, philosophy was said to be the handmaiden to theology. Theology was understood to be the queen of the sciences. When philosophy took the lead, it soon became apparent that it was not up to the task of answering the big questions. The reality of God known through His revelation, however, does provide the answers for such questions.

Lets consider the areas of metaphysics, moral, and epistemology. The metaphysical need for the existence of God implies that there must be something or someone who is big enough, powerful enough, wise enough, and willing enough to create and maintain the universe we live in. If these requirements are not met, then man is forced to admit that he is here by chance occurrence and has no special destiny.{10}

The moral necessity of Gods existence centers on man as a

personal being and a being who distinguishes between right and wrong. There are only two options. Either man was created from an impersonal beginning and his moral system is a product of his culture, or man had a personal beginning and was given laws to follow and an internal sense of right and wrong.{11} The moral necessity of God is founded on the philosophical need to account for why man is both cruel and wonderful at the same time. This can only be explained in terms of the biblical account of the Fall.

The epistemological necessity of Gods existence addresses our ability to know what is ultimately real. Much of the modern problem in the area of knowledge began in the seventeenth century. As the scientific revolution developed, the criteria for truth became that which could be demonstrated in a laboratory. The result was that belief in God and the miraculous, which cannot be demonstrated in a laboratory, came into doubt and were eventually dismissed by many. The final result was pessimism regarding theological truths and, more recently, any truth at all. We have all encountered the individual who asks, How do you know that? And often this question is repeated for every subsequent answer.

The only answer to these three dilemmas is an appeal to the God who is there, and to His natural and special revelation. The basis of Christianity is the belief that God is there and that man can communicate with Him. If this is not true, then we are without a foundation.

Francis Schaeffer and "The Man Without a Bible"

The purpose of this discussion of the works of Francis Schaeffer is that we hope Christians will once again turn to this great apologist for the Christian faith and learn from him. In closing, we will address one of his lesser known works titled *Death In The City.* In chapter seven, The Man Without a

Bible, Schaeffer offers some advice for Christians living in a post-Christian world. He argues very convincingly that the church in America has largely turned away from God and the knowledge of the things of God. This occurred in just a few short decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s.{12}

We must always bear in mind that many people do not believe that the Bible is inspired or authoritative. For these people the Bible is just another book. The dismantling of biblical authority has been very efficient in the last 150 years. Very few of our major secular universities treat the Bible as authoritative anymore. Yet many of these universities were founded at a time when no one would have doubted the importance of the Holy Scriptures. The majority of men at the end of this century hold vastly different views about the Bible than did their ancestors at the close of the previous century. So, how do we share the Christian message with the man without the Bible?

Schaeffer cites three instances where Paul spoke to non-Christians and did not appeal to the Scriptures. These are found in Acts 14:15-17; 17:16-32, and Romans 1:18-2:16. The reason that Paul did not use the Scriptures on these three occasions is that the people he was addressing did not recognize the claims that the Holy Scriptures made on their lives. In approaching these individuals, Paul appealed to the moral knowledge that men possess as a feature of their created being. Schaeffer refers to this as the manishness of man.

In Romans 1:18 we have the description of Gods wrath being poured out on man. Schaeffer believes that this is an ideal place to approach modern man. We may tell the modern non-believer that he knows that God exists and that he has suppressed this knowledge. (The knowledge of God must be understood here as natural revelation, and not the gospel.) Paul means that each and every man, regardless of what he says, knows that God exists. This knowledge of God that the non-believer possesses is supplemented by the moral argument

for Gods existence. The fact that men hold beliefs about right and wrong betrays the fact that they know that God necessarily exists. Men willingly suppress this knowledge of God and this brings His wrath.

The man without the Bible has suppressed the natural revelation of God, not the special revelation found in the Scriptures. The man without the Bible has not followed his initial knowledge of God to the proper conclusions and therefore remains lost. The many men without the Bible present both an opportunity and a challenge for the Christian. The opportunity is that this man is lost and Christians can share their faith with him. The challenge is in showing these lost people how the world around them and the human nature within them point toward the existence of God.

Francis Schaeffer was wonderful at discussing Christian truths with non-believers without appealing to the Scriptures. It is our loss if we do not familiarize ourselves with, and use, the works of one of this countrys greatest Christian thinkers.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.

2. Hosea 4:6.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.

5. Ibid., 217-224.

6. Ibid., 225-236.

7. Ibid., 261-270.

8. Ibid., 207-208.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.

10. Ibid., 275-290.

11. Ibid., 291-302.

12. Ibid., 211.

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What Do I Say Now?

"True for You, But Not For Me"

Since the church began, objections have been raised to the faith. They have varied according to the beliefs and mindset of the day. To be effective in taking a stand for the truth, Christians have had to know the current questions and objections. Maybe youve heard some of the more common objections today such as "Jesus never claimed to be God," or, "What gives *you* the right to say other peoples morals are wrong?" Or how about, "That might be true for you, but its not true for me." Sometimes these objections are well thought out, but often they sound more like slogans, catch-phrases the non-believer has heard but to which he or she probably hasnt given much thought.

If objections such as these have brought an abrupt end to any of your conversations because you werent sure how to respond, a book published last year might be just what you need. The

title is *“True For You, But Not For Me”: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless,* and it was written by Paul Copan, an associate with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Copans goal in this book is to provide responses for Christians who find themselves stumped by the objections of critics. To that end he deals with objections in such areas as knowledge of truth, morality, the uniqueness of Christ, and the hope of those whove never heard the Gospel.

In this article, Ill pull out a few of these objections and give brief answers, some from Copan, and some of my own.

Before doing that, however, I need to make an important point. If non-believers are doing nothing more than sloganeering by hurling objections that they really dont understand, rattling off memorized answers that *we* dont understand, Christians can be guilty of the same behavior of our opponents. Even though the objections might sound recorded, our answers neednt. Thus, I strongly suggest that you get a copy of Copans book or obtain some other books on apologetics which will fill in the gaps left by our discussion.

Relativism

Lets begin with a brief look at the issue of relativism and what it means for discussions about Christianity.

Relativism shows itself primarily in matters of truth and morality. When we say that truth is relative, we mean that it differs according to the times, or to particular circumstances, or to differing tastes and interests. It is the denial that objective truth exists; that is, truth that applies to all people and for all time. Now, most people will probably agree that there is truth in matters of scientific fact, but with respect to religion and morality, each person is said to have his or her own truth. Such things are matters of opinion at best, and are true only relative to particular individuals.

The implications of this are enormous. Evangelism, or the effort to persuade people to believe that the Gospel is true, is prohibited.{1} The claim to have *the* truth about a persons relationship with God is considered arrogant or elitist. Tolerance becomes the "cardinal virtue."{2} The rule seems to be this: Follow your own heart, and dont interfere with anyone following his or hers.

These are problems which relativism produces in dealing with others. But what about our own Christianity? If truth isnt fixed, maybe I should just drop all this Christian business when it becomes inconvenient.

Relativism with Respect to Knowledge

Lets consider the objection represented in the title of Copans book: that is, "Well, that may be true for *you*, but its not for *me.*" Here the non-believer is essentially saying that its okay for you to adopt Christianity if you choose— that it can be *your* truth. But as far as hes concerned, he has not chosen to believe it— for whatever reasons— so it isnt true for him.

This objection would make better sense if the critic said, "Christianity is *meaningful* for you, but it isnt for me." Or, "Christianity might *work* for you, but it doesnt for me." These are reasonable objections and invite serious discussion about the meaning of Christ for every individual and how Christianity "works" in our lives. But the objection voiced is that Christianity is *true* for some people, but not for others. How can that be? Truth is that which is real or statements about what is really the case. "True for you, but not for me" can only be a valid idea if truth is relative to persons, times, circumstances, or places.

The Christian should question the person about this. Does he believe that truth is relative? If so, then hes actually undercutting his own claims. You see, the statement, "It may be true for you, but its not for me," becomes relative as

well. No statement the person makes can be considered a fixed truth that everyone— even the relativist— should believe. So, our first response might be to point out that, based upon his own relativistic views, anything *he* says is relative; its truth-status might change tomorrow. So theres no reason for anyone to take it seriously.{3}

On a deeper level we can point out that if theres no objective, fixed truth, all meaningful conversation will grind to a halt. If nothing a person says can be taken as true or false in the normal sense, the listener wont know if the speaker really means what he says. What would be the value, for example, of reading the cautions on a bottle of pills if the meaning and truth of the words arent set? Trying to communicate ideas when truth and meaning fluctuate like the stock market is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. Theres no way to get hold of any idea with which to agree or disagree.

The non-believer might object that not all matters are relative, only matters of religion and morality. However, the burden is on the *relativist* to prove that matters of religion and morality *are* relative, for it isnt obvious that this is so. Why should these matters be treated differently with respect to truth than others? The fact that one cant debate morality on the basis of evidences as one would, say, a scientific issue doesnt mean that the truth about it cant be known. More important, however, is the fact that Christianity in particular is tied very tightly to historical events which *are* matters of fact.

Christianity cant be true for one person but not for another. Either it is true— and all should believe— or it isnt— and it should be discarded.

Moral Relativism

Lets turn our attention to objections regarding morality. One

objection we hear is similar to one weve already discussed about truth. Non-believers will say, “Your values might be right for you, but they arent for me.”{4}

First, we need to understand the historic Christian view of morality. According to Scripture, morals are grounded in God. As God is unchanging, so also is His morality. As Paul Copan notes, such morals are discovered, not invented.{5} They are objective; they do not come from within you or me, but are true completely apart from us.

Having abandoned God as the standard for morality and replaced Him with ourselves, some say there is no objective morality. When told that a certain individual believed that morality is a sham, Samuel Johnson responded, “Why sir, if he really believes there is no distinction between virtue and vice, let us count our spoons before he leaves.”{6} Johnsons quip doesnt prove that morals are objective, but it indicates how well have to live if they arent. If matters of morality are relative, how can we trust anything another person says about moral issues? For example, if a person says that you can trust him to hold your money for you because he is honest, how do you know whether what he means by “honest” is what *you* mean by it? And how can you be sure he wont decide once he has your money that honesty isnt such a good policy after all? Such a situation would be *“existentially* (or practically) unworkable.”{7}

Paul Copan argues that we know intuitively that some things are wrong for everyone. Ask the non-believer if torture, slave labor, and rape are okay for some people. Ask him if there is a moral distinction between the labors of the late Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler. Or press him even further and ask how he would respond if he were arrested and beaten for no reason, or if someone pounded his car with a sledgehammer.{8} Would he feel better knowing that the perpetrators found personal fulfillment in such activities? Or would he cry “Unfair!”?

Some non-believers are willing to concede that within a given society there must be moral standards in order for people to live together in peace. However, theyll say, differences between *cultures* are legitimate. Thus, theyll complain, “Who are *you* to say another cultures values are wrong?”{9} One culture has no right to force its morality on another.

But is it true that moral standards are culturally relative? Or perhaps the better question should be, Is it really likely that the non-believer believes this himself? You might recall the Womens Conference in Beijing several years ago. Representatives from all over the world gathered to plan strategies for gaining rights for women who were being oppressed. Could a cultural relativist support such a conference? Its hard to see how. Cultural relativism leaves a society with its hands tied in the face of atrocities committed by people of other cultures. But as we have noted before, we know intuitively that some things are wrong, not just for me or my culture but for all peoples and all cultures. To take a firm stand against the immoral acts of individuals or cultures one needs the foundation of moral absolutes.

Religious Pluralism

Christians today, especially on college campuses, are free to believe as they please and practice their Christianity as they wish . . . as long as they arent foolish enough to actually say out loud that they believe that Jesus is the only way to God. Nothing brings on the wrath of non-believers and invites insults and name- calling like claims for the exclusivity of Christ.

Religious pluralism is in vogue today. Many people believe either that religions are truly different but equally valid since no one really knows the truth about ultimate realities. Others believe that the adherents of at least all the major religions are really worshipping the same “Higher Being;” they

just call him (or it) by different names. Religions are superficially different, they believe, but essentially the same.

Lets look at a couple of objections stemming from a pluralistic mindset.

One objection is that "Christianity is arrogant and imperialistic"{10} for presenting itself as the only way. Of course, Christians can act in an arrogant and imperialistic manner, and in such cases they deserve to be called down. But this objection often arises simply as a response to the claim of exclusivity regardless of the Christians manner. The only way this claim could be arrogant, however, is if there are indeed competing religions or philosophies which are equally valid. So, to make a valid point, the critic needs to prove that Christianity isnt what it claims to be.

As Copan notes, it can just as easily be the *critic* who is arrogant. Pluralists who reinterpret religious beliefs to suit their pluralism are in effect telling Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc., what it is they *really* believe. Like the king of Benares who knows that the blind men are really touching an elephant when they *think* they are touching a wall or a rope or something else, the pluralist believes he or she knows what all the adherents of the major world religions dont. The pluralist must have a view of truth that others dont. *That* is arrogance.{11}

Youve probably heard this objection to the exclusive claims of Christ: "If you grew up in India, youd be a Hindu."{12} The assertion is that we only believe what we do because thats the way we were brought up. This argument commits what is called the genetic fallacy. It tries to explain away a belief or idea based upon its source. But as Copan says, "What if we tell a Marxist or a conservative Republican that if he had been raised in Nazi Germany, he would have belonged to the Hitler Youth? He will probably agree but ask what your point is."{13}

The same argument, in fact, could be turned back on the pluralist to explain *his* belief in pluralism! Copan quotes Alvin Plantinga who says, "Pluralism isnt and hasnt been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldnt have been a pluralist. Does it follow that he shouldnt be a pluralist. . . ?"{14} The pluralist, in todays relativistic climate, is just as apt to be going along with the beliefs of *his* culture. So why should we believe *him*?

The Uniqueness of Christ

The idea that Jesus is the only way to God has always been a stumbling block for non-Christians. Lets consider two specific objections stemming from this claim.

Even people who have made no commitment to Christ as Lord hold Him in very high regard. Jesus is usually at or near the top of lists of the greatest people who ever lived. But as odd as it seems, people find a way to categorize Jesus so that they can regard Him as one of the greatest humans ever to have lived while rejecting His central teachings! Thus, one way to deflect the Christian message isnt so much an outright rejection of the faith as it is a reduction of it. Thus, a slogan often heard is "Jesus is just like any other great religious leader."{15}

One has to wonder, however, how a man can be considered only a great religious teacher (or to have a high level of "God-consciousness", as some say) who made the kinds of claims Jesus did, or who did the works that He did. Consider the claims He made for Himself: that He could forgive sins, that He would judge the world, that He and the Father are one. None of the other great religious teachers made such claims. Furthermore, none of the others rose from the dead to give credence to what He taught.

A favorite objection to arguments for the deity of Christ is

that Jesus never said, “I am God”.{16} But does the fact that there is no record of Him saying those exact words mean that He didnt see Himself as such?

What reasons do we have for believing Jesus was divine? Here are a few.{17} He claimed to have a unique relationship to the Father (John 20:17). He accepted the title “The Christ, the Son of the Blessed One” (Mark 14:61-62). He identified Himself with the Son of Man in Daniels prophecies who was understood to be the Messiah, the special one sent from God (Matt. 26:64, Dan. 7:13). He spoke on His own authority as though Gods commands were His own (Mark 1:27). He claimed to forgive sins which is something only God can do (Mark 2:1-12). He called for devotion to *Himself*, not just to God (Matt. 10:34-39). He identified Himself with the “I Am” of the Old Testament (John 8:57-59). As Copan notes, “Jesus didnt need to explicitly assert his divinity because his words and deeds and self-understanding assumed his divine status.”{18}

If this is so, why didnt Jesus plainly say, “I am God”? There are several possible reasons. First, He came to minister to the Jews first. Being so strongly monotheistic, they would have killed Jesus the first time He referred to Himself as God. Second, “God” is a term mostly reserved for the Father. It serves to highlight His authority even over the second Person of the Trinity. Third, Jesus humanity was just as important as His deity. To refer to Himself as God would have caused His deity to overshadow His humanity. Remember that the Incarnation was a new and strange thing. It was something that most people had to be eased into. Conclusion

Although Christians cant be expected to have satisfactory answers to all the possible objections people can throw our way, with a little study we can learn some sound responses to some of the clichéd objections of our day. Phrases little understood and tossed out in a knee-jerk fashion can still have a profound influence upon us. We need to recognize them and defuse them.

If you still think youd like more ammunition, get a copy of Paul Copans book. Youll be glad you did.

Notes

Paul Copan, *“True For You, But Not For Me”: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 21.

1. Ibid., 21.

2. Ibid., 24.

3. Ibid., 44.

4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 47.

8. Ibid., 48.

9.Ibid., 78.

10. Ibid., 80.

11. Ibid., 82.

12. Ibid., 83.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 107-09.

15. Ibid., 115.

16. Ibid., 115-118.

17. Ibid., 119.

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Christian Cliches

Conversations and Clichés

Do you ever use clichés? Do you hear them often? No doubt you can answer "Yes" to either question. But have you stopped to consider what they may mean? Christians often use clichés among themselves and even with non-Christians, but there may be a need to give thought to the meanings of these oft-repeated phrases. That is the intent of this essay. We will investigate what is behind the "Christian clichés" that tend to become so much a part of our conversations.

Let's begin by considering a dictionary definition of the word *cliché*. A cliché is a "trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse."{1}

My ministry has put me in touch with Christians all over this country. As I engage in conversation with these Christians, invariably I will hear language about Christian things that has become "stereotyped" and has "lost impact by long overuse." This doesn't mean there isn't truth contained in the clichés. Indeed, often there is truth of great importance for Christian theology and life. The problem is that frequently we use these clichés while thinking we know what we are saying. But do we? Could we explain these phrases if someone were to

ask us to define them? My experience is that Christians have difficulty when asked to explain themselves.

Let’s listen to the following conversation and hear how a Christian named Tom responds to questions from a non-believer named Sam.

Tom: Hi, Sam!

Sam: Hello, Tom. Remember when you were to talking to Jim yesterday?

Tom: You mean before the sales meeting?

Sam: Yeah. I hope you aren’t offended, but I was listening to your conversation.

Tom: Oh, that’s okay. We weren’t having a private conversation. We were just sharing our beliefs.

Sam: Well, I’m curious about some of the things you discussed.

Tom: Like what?

Sam: Like when you said you have Jesus in your heart. Were you referring to the Prophet who lived so long ago? If so, how can

you possibly have Him in your heart?

Tom: Well, yes, I was referring to the Jesus of long ago. But He is alive now, and He has saved me.

Sam: What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible. And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

Tom: I guess they sound weird, but they really aren't. You see, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and His spirit lives in me.

Sam: Tom, I don't mean to be rude, but such things sound ludicrous to me. Hey, my phone's ringing and I'm expecting an important call. Maybe we can talk again later.

Sam asked some good questions. They deserved answers. But was Tom able to explain himself? He had a difficult time, didn't he? For example, the phrase, "I have Jesus in my heart" had become a cliché for Tom. He was able to converse with a fellow Christian with the assumption that they understood one another. But it was a different matter when a non-Christian expressed his curiosity about the conversation he had heard the previous day.

I have Jesus in my heart is one of several clichés we will consider. The goal of this article is to motivate Christians to give attention to our conversations and see if you find clichés lurking there.

I Have Jesus in My Heart

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart.* As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

In the third chapter of Paul's Ephesian letter he prayed that his readers would "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . ." (Eph. 3:16-17, NASB). Galatians 2 contains one of the most powerful expressions of the indwelling Christ in Paul's life. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . ." (Gal. 2:20, NASB). In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asks, "do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5, NASB). These passages, and many more, serve to show that the New Testament affirms that Jesus indwells His followers. Thus it is important to stress that when someone says *I have Jesus in my heart* it has biblical merit. A problem arises, though, when we use this expression without attention to its profound message. When this happens we are using a cliché.

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then

we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 “the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing.”{2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted “that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God.”{3} In addition, we should realize that Paul’s favorite expression revolved around the phrase “in Christ.” This phrase “(or some cognate expression, such as “in the Lord,” “in Him,” etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul.”{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian’s life through the Spirit.

The second point of reference concerns the word *heart*. The Bible refers to the heart of man frequently. “The heart is the focus of mind, feeling, and will; it stands for the whole personality.”{5} Jesus is to “take up residence” in our whole personality. So when a Christian says *Jesus is in my heart* there is a literal implication. Jesus resides supernaturally in the believer through His Spirit. This is an astounding doctrine that indicates a transformed person! May our Lord lead us to continue sharing His presence in our lives by indicating that we understand truly what it means to say *I have Jesus in my heart.*

I Have Faith

Is a Christian the only person who has faith? Many Christians seem to think so. On many occasions I have played “the devil’s advocate” among Christian groups by asking them to describe and defend their beliefs. One of the most frequent responses I get is *I have faith*. When I hear this I usually retort by saying “So what? Do you think that because you are a Christian you are given sole ownership of the idea?” After this I encourage them to think about the implications of the phrase. It is much more than a cliché.

All people, Christians and non-Christians, even atheists, exercise faith. That is, each day of our lives we apply faith in simple and profound ways. For example, you may take a pill of some kind today. That requires faith that the pill will help you rather than hurt you. If you travel on an airplane, that requires faith that you will arrive safely at your intended destination. Usually you don't even see the pilots until you have landed. These are everyday illustrations of faith. But just what does this word mean?

A major dictionary provides us with intriguing definitions. The first entry states that faith is "confidence or trust in a person or thing." The second entry says faith is "belief which is not based on proof." And then in the eighth entry the dictionary declares faith is "trust in God and in His promises as made through Christ by which man is justified or saved."{6} Obviously the eighth entry comes closest to a Christian understanding of faith. The first entry is also important to a Christian because it includes the idea of trust in a person. But it is the second entry that causes the most problem among Christians. Too many Christians use *I have faith* to mean they believe in something that is not based on proof. Unfortunately, this is when the phrase becomes a cliché.

For over 100 years, naturalism has been the dominant worldview in our culture. Among other things, this worldview bows at the altar of modern science to the extent that many believe that nothing can be true until it can be proven scientifically. Many Christians have been highly influenced by this concept. Thus they tend to say *I have faith* when they can't "prove" their beliefs in a scientific manner. This reaction is not legitimate within a Christian worldview. It is important to realize that even an atheistic scientist takes faith into the laboratory. There are facets of his own life that cannot be "proven" scientifically. If he is married, he may say he loves his wife. Can that be proven scientifically?

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial

preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of "trust *in* a person or thing" (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already "proven" to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

The same is true for one who claims to be a Christian in our day. When we say we have faith, we should continue by declaring faith *in* the living God.

I'm Saved!

When you say *I'm saved!*, have you ever considered what someone may be thinking? People who hear you may have a number of questions. For example, they may ask why you are speaking in present tense. If you are saved now, does that mean you were actually saved at some point in the past? If so, does the present connect with the past in some way? Or they may want to know why you needed to be saved in the first place. Were you drowning and someone rescued you? Maybe they would even like to know if you are saved *for* something or someone. Proclaiming *I'm saved!* can be a strange expression if it is not explained. If someone asks for an explanation and we can't respond, we may be guilty of using a cliché. We think we know what we mean, and our fellow Christians may think they know what is meant, but a lack of articulation implies a lack of understanding.

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When

we say *I'm saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that *Jesus will save*, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . ."{7} While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, "For my eyes have seen Thy salvation . . ." (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph's son was being called God's salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

Through these and numerous other verses we have a more complete picture of what *I'm saved!* entails. But there is a crucial question leaping from such passages. If sin creates the need for salvation, then what is it? To put it simply, when the Christian proclaims *I'm saved!* his hearers should understand that ". . . sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God"{8} affecting everyone (Rom. 3:23). This is a crucial concept in contemporary culture that is generally misunderstood and rejected. In addition, such alienation from God cannot be rectified by "rightdoing." It can only be rectified through Jesus' sacrificial payment for sin on the cross. I'm saved because of what Jesus did for me. In an amazing, life-changing way an event of the past

brings salvation into the present. Praise God, we have been saved! Now we can live knowing salvation is in the present.

What Would Jesus Do?

What Would Jesus Do? is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. "The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins, paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD."{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

One of the more positive aspects of *What Would Jesus Do?* is that it can serve as a simple reminder of the Christian's moral life. Surely each Christian has a perspective of Jesus that includes the moral perfection that permeated His earthly life. There is no greater model to emulate than Jesus. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15, NASB). The same writer tells us He "offered Himself without blemish to God . . ." (Heb. 9:14, NASB). Jesus was and is the only one who could make such an unblemished offering. So asking *What Would Jesus Do?*, whether audibly or inaudibly, can awaken us to our need for a moral model.

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask What *did* Jesus do? in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with "moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22)."{10} More importantly, on the cross "he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind

(the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . .”{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus’ disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples’ reaction after hearing Jesus’ teaching. He said, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were “amazed” at His words. Jesus continued by stating, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were “even more astonished” and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” (Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

The actions and words of Jesus and the reactions of the disciples remind us of the deity of Jesus. Think of this in present time. If Jesus physically walked beside you, would you always know what He was about to do? “Jesus is unique in his identity as the incarnate Son of God, and we should not assume that we could do or should do everything he did.”{12} Thus, caution is urged when we assume we always know what Jesus *would* do while we affirm what Jesus *did* do.

Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.

4. Ibid., 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, “Sin,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
9. Albert Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?”, *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. Ibid.
12. Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About “WWJD”, 6.

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Why We Should Believe in the Trinity

Dr. Pat Zukeran directly confronts unorthodox teaching on the Trinity, confirming the historic Christian formulation of one God in three persons—and examining John 1:1 in detail.

How the Doctrine of the Trinity Developed

The doctrine of the Trinity separates orthodox Christian teaching from heresy. This essential teaching of Christianity states that we believe in one God who exists in three separate

and distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each member is equal in nature and substance. (For a biblical defense of the Trinity, see Jehovah's Witnesses and the Trinity.)

A common question raised by heretical groups is, When and how did this doctrine develop? According to the Watchtower tract *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* this doctrine was not held by the church fathers. Rather, it was imposed on the church by the pagan emperors who had "converted" to Christianity at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. The bishops in attendance were overawed by the emperor and signed the creed against their inclination. Let's take a careful look at what really happened at these two key church councils.

The Council of Nicea was the first church council ever called. Until this time, the church was under severe persecution from the Roman Empire. Early in the fourth century, the emperor Constantine showed an interest in Christianity and was tutored by Hosius of Cordova who held to the doctrine of the Trinity. With peace in the empire, Christianity spread all across the world. However, in Alexandria a presbyter named Arius gathered a significant following around his teaching that Jesus was a created being and not God. As his teachings spread, the controversy grew and Constantine realized it needed to be addressed. He thus called for the first universal church council at Nicea to debate the matter.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity itself was not discussed, the doctrine of the deity of Christ was confirmed. In attendance were approximately 300 bishops, many of whom were divided over the issue. Arius with his supporters, Theonas, Secundus, and Eusebius of Nicomedia, held the view that Jesus was an inferior creature to God the Father. The orthodox camp was led by Bishops Hosius, Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Athanasius who argued that Jesus is God.

After hours of debate, the council concluded the following in their creed:

> "We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. . . ."

While the deity of Christ—a crucial aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity—was affirmed, Arius nevertheless continued to teach his doctrine of Christ's inferiority, and Arianism came back into favor for a short time. Fifty years later, in A.D. 381, the Council of Constantinople was called by Emperor Theodosius. Here the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed and further clarified. It is at this council that the Holy Spirit was declared equal in divinity with the Father and the Son.

The councils of Nicea and Constantinople did not establish a new creed. The councils clarified and formalized the belief in the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, views already held by the apostles and church fathers. However, Jehovah's Witnesses contest this point. Let's see if the church fathers who lived before the Council of Nicea, the ante-Nicene fathers, held to the deity of Christ.

What Did the Church Fathers Say About the Trinity?

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were never a part of the theology of the church fathers. In the article *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* several church fathers are cited as denying the orthodox view of Jesus. They include Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165, Irenaeus A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria A.D. 215, Tertullian A.D. 230, Hippolytus A.D. 235, and Origen who died in A.D. 250. The Watchtower list quotes from each theologian, claiming that they believed the inferiority of the Son to the

Father. But the article contains no footnotes citing the source of these quotations.

Did these significant figures in church history really deny the divine nature of Christ? Let us take a careful (and referenced) look at what the ante-Nicene fathers stated in their original writings.

Justin Martyr: "…the Father of the universe has a Son; who being the logos and First-begotten is also God" (*First Apology* 63:15).

Irenaeus: (referencing Jesus) "…in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, . . ." (*Against Heresies* I, x, 1).

Clement of Alexandria: "Both as God and as man, the Lord renders us every kind of help and service. As God He forgives sin, as man He educates us to avoid sin completely" (*Christ the Educator,* chapter 3.1). In addition, "Our educator, O children, resembles His Father, God, whose son He is. He is without sin, without blame, without passion of soul, God immaculate in form of man accomplishing His Father's will" (*Christ the Educator* Chapter 2:4).

Tertullian: "…the only God has also a Son, his Word who has proceeded from himself, by whom all things were made and without whom nothing has been made: that this was sent by the Father into the virgin and was born of her both man and God. Son of Man, Son of God, …" (*Against Praxeas*, 2).

Hippolytus: "And the blessed John in the testimony of his gospel, gives us an account of this economy and acknowledges this word as God, when he says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' If then the Word was with God and was also God, what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one; of two persons however, and of a third economy, the grace of the Holy Ghost" (*Against the*

Heresy of One Noetus. 14).

Origen: (with regard to John 1:1) "…the arrangement of the sentences might be thought to indicate an order; we have first, 'in the beginning was the Word,' then 'And the Word was with God,' and thirdly, 'and the Word was God,' so that it might be seen that the Word being with God makes Him God" (*Commentary on John*, Book 2, Chapter 1).

Not only in these instances, but also throughout their writings the ante-Nicene fathers strongly defend the deity of Christ.

What Did the Apostle John Say?

To summarize our argument thus far, we discovered that the doctrine of the Trinity was formally adopted as the official teaching of Christianity after the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. I argued against opponents who state that the doctrine was imposed on the church by Constantine in a political move. Rather, the Nicene Creed was a formal statement of a doctrine already articulated by the church fathers even before Nicea. Now, let us take a look and see what the apostle John teaches.

John opens his Gospel with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *In the beginning was the Word* shows that the Word was eternally with the Father and not a created being. The second phrase, *and the Word was with God,* shows that the Word is a distinct person from the Father. Thirdly, *and the Word was God* reveals that although separate and distinct, the Word in nature and substance is fully God.

Throughout his Gospel, John demonstrates that Jesus possesses the attributes which qualify Him to be God. Jesus displays power over nature, over disease, and even death. He has a grasp of the Law of God which He, though not formally trained, teaches with such authority as had never been seen before

(7:14-16). Testimony from John the Baptist (1:29; 3:26-36) shows His authority to be God. Jesus also accepted the worship of men (9:38).

Jesus also makes several statements revealing His divinity. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, “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.” Here, Jesus commands followers to honor Him as they honor the Father. To do this, one must acknowledge Jesus as being equal in nature to God.

John 8:58 states, “‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am.'” The term *I am* is the term God used when He spoke to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Here is a clear statement of Christ declaring His divinity.

In John 10:30 Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” Jesus did not mean “I am one in purpose with God.” He was claiming to *be* God. The verses that follow His declaration make that clear: “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” (vv. 31-33). The Jews clearly understood His statement and Jesus does not deny their accusation.

The culmination of John’s testimony of Jesus’ deity is in 20:28, which is the conclusion he desires all his readers to come to. “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!'” John argues throughout his entire Gospel for the purpose that all who read it might come to believe that Jesus is God incarnate.

John 1:1

In spite of the overwhelming testimony throughout the entire

Gospel of John, there are some who argue about the translation of John 1:1. *The New World Translation* of the Jehovah's Witnesses reads, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was a god," which makes Jesus to be an inferior being to God. In refutation of this translation, I will explain the Greek rules behind the proper translation and argue that the Greek word *God* (*theos*) in John 1:1c must be translated in the definite or qualitative sense—written *God* with a capital *G*—rather than indefinitely—*a god*—as the NWT has done. This discussion will get a little technical, but the importance of the subject deserves careful attention.

Let me first define some key terms of Greek grammar. An *anarthrous noun* is a noun without the definite article, the English equivalent of the word *the*. A noun in the nominative case in Greek often signifies that this is the subject of the sentence. A predicate nominative noun is a noun in the same case and is equivalent to the subject. The Greek construction of John1:1c looks like this, *theos ēn ho logos,* and is literally translated "God was the Word."

The subject of this phrase is *the Word* (*ho logos*). We know this because it is in the Greek nominative case and it possesses the definite article *ho*. *God* (*theos*) is in the nominative case and does not have an article. It precedes the equative verb "was" (*ēn*), and therefore is the predicate nominative.

The Jehovah's Witnesses argue that since *God* (*theos*) does not have the article before it, it must be translated indefinitely. So we get their translation, "a god." However, there are other possibilities available for translation.

According to a Greek grammar rule called Colwell's rule, the construction in John 1:1c—anarthrous predicate nominative (*theos*)-equative verb (*ēn*)-articular noun (*ho logos*)—does not automatically mean that the predicate nominative must be indefinite. Colwell's rule, in summary, states that an

anarthrous predicate nominative preceeding an equative verb can be translated as either (1) definite, (2) qualitative, or (3) indefinite. Thus, (1) as a definite noun *the Word* equals *God*, (2) as a qualitative *the Word* has the attributes and qualities of *God*, or (3) as an indefinite noun *the Word* is *a god*. Context determines which one it will be.

In the vast majority of cases in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, this construction is translated as a qualitative or definite noun. Greek Scholar Dan Wallace writes, "an anarthrous pre verbal PN [predicate nominative] is normally qualitative, sometimes definite and only rarely indefinite. . . . We believe there may be some in the NT, but this is nevertheless the most poorly attested semantic force for such a construction."{1}

Furthermore, the translators of the *New World Translation* are not even consistent with their own rule of translation. Throughout John we find instances of an anarthrous *God* (*theos*) translated not as "a god," but as "God." John 1:6 and 1:18 are clear examples of this. Therefore, to argue that *God* (*theos*) in John 1:1c *must* be translated as indefinite solely because it has no article is clearly incorrect.

In an effort to insure that our decision agrees with the overall context of John's Gospel, we must see if the Gospel of John argues that Christ is inferior to God. As I showed previously, this is certainly not the case.

We must conclude that grammar and context argue against an indefinite translation that makes the Word an inferior being to God. The noun *God* (*theos*) should be translated "God," as a definite or qualitative, thus upholding the fact that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man.

Alleged Objections from the Gospel of

John

To close this discussion, I will address several problem verses in the Gospel of John that are used in attempts to deny the deity of Christ.

In some translations like the *King James Version* and *New American Standard*, John 1:14 reads that Jesus is "the only begotten from the Father." Some cults understand the Greek word translated *only begotten* to mean "to procreate as the Father."{2} In other words, God created Jesus. However, this definition would be inconsistent with John 1:1a, 17:5, and 17:24 which declare the eternal nature of the Word.

The term, translated in some versions as "only begotten," may sound to English ears like a metaphysical relationship. However, in Greek it means no more than *unique* or *only*. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is used of the widow of Nain's "only" son and Jairus' "only" daughter (Luke 7:12, 9:38 and 8:42). Its use in Hebrews 11:17 with reference to Isaac is particularly insightful. Isaac, we know, was not Abraham's only son. According to Genesis 16 and 25:1, Abraham fathered several other sons. Isaac is the "only begotten" in that he was unique; he was the only son given to Abraham by God's promise. Therefore, when *only begotten* is used of Jesus, He is the only begotten in the sense that He is unique. No other is or can be the Son of God. The unique relationship the Son has with His Father is one of the great themes in the Gospel of John.

The next controversial verse is John 14:28. Jesus states, ". . . I am going to the Father for the Father is greater than I." Here the Jehovah's Witnesses understand the term *greater* to mean "superior in nature." Thus they assert that Jesus is stating His inferiority to God. Once again, however, this would argue against John's consistent theme of the deity of Christ. *Greater* here refers to position, not to nature. For example, we would agree with the statement that the President

of the United States is greater than you or I. As the chief executive of the country he is greater due to his position. However, we would disagree with a statement that says the President is by nature better than you or I. In other words, is he a superior being to the rest of the citizens of the United States? No, we are all human and equal in nature. *Greater* refers to position, not to nature.

There is an established economy in the Trinity. The Father is the head who sends the Son. The Son sends the Spirit. All three are equal in nature, but different in position. This is called "functional subordination." We see the same principle in 1 Corinthians 11:3, ". . . and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." The husband is greater than his wife, her head by position. However, he is not a superior being to his wife. The same applies to Jesus. The Father is greater by position, not by nature.

It is essential that we defend the doctrine of the Trinity, the foundation of Christian theology. Many of the great church fathers courageously defended this truth. Let us follow in their footsteps.

Notes

1. Dan Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 262.

2. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Should You Believe in the Trinity? (*Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 15.

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End Time Anxieties

End Time Concerns

This past January, the *Wall Street Journal* published a special edition that at first glance anticipated the arrival of the next millennium. However, on closer inspection it quickly became apparent that this edition was a spoof– the year on the masthead was the year *1000.* Still, what was interesting was how similar many stories were to their modern counterparts–there was even an account of a sex scandal in high political circles. The underlying message from the *Journal* would appear to be that just as the transition to the year 1000 went off without a hitch, so too life will go on as we enter a new millennium.

However, it would be naïve to ignore the many threats that currently exist to civilization. Recent news reports indicate that North Korea has the capability to hit any part of the United States with nuclear warheads. China too has become increasingly aggressive militarily and has seriously eroded American technical superiority through espionage. And Russia appears headed to a return to totalitarian government; recently, the lower house of the Russian Duma voted to resurrect the forty-foot statue of the founder of the Soviet Secret Police which had been toppled by pro-democracy marchers in 1991. Two years ago, the same house of the Duma had voted to resurrect the Soviet Union itself! On top of all this, there is an increasing awareness that the Y2K computer crisis may be much more problematic than anticipated; even the entire National Guard was mobilized for exercises in May 1999 to prepare for any disruptions the millennial bug may cause. Some fear a declaration of martial law should the problem get out of hand. Perhaps the advent of the 21st century will not be as painless as that of the 11th century after all.

Questions concerning the future are of special relevance to Christians. Contrary to other worldviews that see history as cyclical, the Bible teaches that history as we know it will come to an end with the dramatic return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the Bible has much to say of the end times, Christians have been exposed to a variety of end time scenarios which spell out in exacting detail the chronology of the last days. In this respect, we share much in common with those who faced the transition to the year 1000. The anxiety that many westerners experienced as the year 1000 approached was due in part to a theological concept popularized by the great Christian thinker, Augustine. According to Augustine, the millennial reign of Christ began at His first coming. Since the book of Revelation teaches of a 1000 year period in which Christ reigns over all the earth, Augustine allegorized this concept by teaching that Christ had bound Satan through His earthly ministry. This made complete sense to Augustine, since it would account for the tremendous growth of the church from a tiny band of first century Jews to the favored religion of the empire in Augustine's day. But when Christ did not return anytime in the 11th century, this interpretation was significantly altered.{1} History triumphed over exegesis.

As we approach the year 2000, some Christians are proclaiming that Christ's return is sure to occur within a few short years. One well-known Christian leader recently suggested that the Antichrist is probably living today and that the second coming of Christ should occur in the next ten years.{2} In the current climate, it is necessary that we examine the end time anxieties that are prevalent today.

Adventism Old and New

With the approach of the third millennium, there has been a noticeable increase of fervor among many sincere believers that Christ's return should be expected in the near future. As an example of this expectation, consider the success of the

Left Behind book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This series, detailing the coming rapture of the saints, the horrible tribulation period, and other aspects of biblical eschatology, has sold over 3.5 million copies since 1995.{3} While it is possible that such a work would find a ready audience at any other time, it is probably not coincidental that such success would be attained as the new millennium approaches.

The increased emphasis by many Christians on the probability that the return of Christ is imminent can be attributed to an understanding of prophecy that has become especially popular in the last 160 years. This form of interpretation, which had been sporadically utilized throughout church history, is known as Adventism, the belief that Christ's second coming could happen at any moment and will inaugurate the millennial kingdom and the end of the age.{4} The early church lived in high expectation of Christ's imminent return, but by the third century that view became a minority. Throughout history, Adventism has appealed to religious bodies with highly rigorous ethical codes, since an "any moment" return would easily distinguish the lukewarm Christian from the true Christian. Adventists in history comprise a wide spectrum, from the heretical Montanists of the second century, to those groups associated with the Radical Reformation of the 16th century. And although Adventism was considered a minority position throughout most of church history, today it is the predominant position among evangelical Christians, especially in the United States.

This change in interpretation came about though an innovative understanding of Scripture developed by John Darby, a 19th century pastor whose disillusionment with the spiritual condition of most Christians led him to conclude that the contemporary church was in apostasy. He therefore developed a philosophy of history, known as dispensationalism, which attempted to demonstrate how God's plan of redemption has

unfolded under differing circumstances throughout time. It was Darby's interpretation that as the return of Christ draws near, the corruption and apostasy of the church would be increasingly obvious. It is through dispensationalism that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have been seen as symbolic of different periods of church history.{5}

Especially significant was Darby's idea that Christ's return would occur in two stages. Initially, Christ would secretly come *for* the saints just prior to the great Tribulation, to separate the true believers from the apostates and the unbelievers. Then, at the conclusion of the Tribulation period, Christ will come *with* the saints, in power and great glory, to establish His millennial reign.{6} The concept of a pretribulation rapture has become the dominant position among conservative Christians in the U.S., and at one time was a test of orthodoxy for many. However, this was primarily a reaction against liberalism's denial of Christ's personal return. Today, many Christians have agreed to disagree on this issue, as conservative biblical scholars have shown that both the midtribulation rapture and the posttribulation rapture are viable interpretations. While all three positions agree that Christ will personally return, the quandary is *when*. But as we shall see, attempts to determine the timing of Christ's return have invariably ended in failure.

Words of Caution

In January 1999 a cult group from Denver was expelled from Israel after Israeli authorities determined that they had gone to Israel in the hope that their radical activities would actually provoke the second coming of Christ. Their leader had predicted that he was to die on the streets of Jerusalem, only to be resurrected three days later.{7} Of course, Revelation chapter 11 speaks of a similar occurrence when the Beast will kill God's two witnesses in Jerusalem. And although this cult

group was certainly not composed of orthodox Christians, it is becoming increasingly evident that even many Christians are attaching special significance to the third millennium for the end times. Is there a biblical basis for doing so? Let's examine that question.

While the church has always looked for the second coming of Christ, it was the dispensational theology of the modern period that seemed to unlock many difficulties associated with prophetic fulfillment. Dispensationalism makes a distinction between Israel and the church, and anticipates the imminent return of Christ after Isreal's restoration as a nation. Consequently with the re- establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many biblical interpreters became convinced that the end was drawing near. Still, it was not until the 1970's, with the publication of Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth,* that an easy to understand approach to biblical prophecy became available. This book seemed to unlock the many mysteries of the book of Revelation, and went on to sell millions of copies. Lindsey's work has remained popular, perhaps due to his attempt to show how the events in the book of Revelation are consistent with the contemporary world. For instance, the Kings of the East with the army of 200 million is said to be Communist China, while the King of the North is Soviet Russia. Written like a Tom Clancy novel, it convinced many Christians that we were truly living in the "last days." This type of interpretation led many to believe that the peace negotiations which began in 1975 between Israel and Egypt was the very same peace agreement that the Antichrist is said to break in Daniel 9:27. But once again, history has disproved that theory as well.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this is that precise interpretation of biblical prophecy is risky business. Just as those who advocate a hidden code in the Bible only discover "predicted" events after the fact, so too Christians need to demonstrate humility when attempting to

interpret apocalyptic images. A key to interpreting the book of Revelation is understanding the purpose of the book. The apostle John was writing to Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wanted Christians to understand that severe persecution could not prevent God's victory over satanic forces. The Revelation was not written to satisfy our curiosity about future events, but to assure believers that God's redemptive program will go forward.

Numerous times throughout church history, sincere people have attempted to discern the details of prophetic Scripture only to have their interpretation disproved by historical events. This often brings discredit to the cause of Christ. Even Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the history of the church, misunderstood the details of biblical prophecy. Like countless others, he failed to acknowledge the difference between the clear teaching of Scripture and end time speculations. Consequently, when interpreting prophetic Scripture we should acknowledge the distinction between the text and our own inferences, remembering to place primary emphasis on the *general* aspects of the text.{8}

Signs of the Times?

As we are considering the possibility that the personal return of Jesus Christ is somehow connected to the year 2000, it is important to recognize that in fact many attempts have been made to determine the approximate date of the Lord's return throughout church history. Jonathan Edwards, considered by many to be the most eminent American theologian, believed the 1,260 days of Revelation chapter 12 were actually years. Assuming that the start of the 1,260 years began in 606 a.d., Edwards concluded that Christ would return in 1866. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that the Pope was the Antichrist and would be overthrown in 1836.{9} This goes to show once again that even the most brilliant minds have

been unable to correctly predict the chronology of the end times.

One of the main problems when making predictions of Christ's return has been the emphasis placed on signs of the times. Typically, predictions are based on signs that are assumed to reflect events predicted in Scripture. But when the disciples asked Jesus for the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, Jesus replied in very general terms. He spoke of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, and the preaching of the gospel in all the world. Scholars still debate whether Jesus is speaking of the Tribulation period here, or of the years leading up to the Tribulation. But it would appear that these signs that Jesus gave are fairly common events throughout church history. Only the proclamation of the gospel in all the world remains to be fulfilled.

Another aspect of interpreting biblical prophecy is maintaining the balance between the imminence and the delay of Christ's return. While many interpreters emphasize the "any moment" return of Christ, especially those who hold to a pretribulation rapture, it is clear that Christ warned His followers not to be disappointed if He failed to come when they expected Him. The Parable of the Ten Maidens (Matt. 25:1-13) and the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servant (Matt. 24:45-51) both emphasize the importance of remaining faithful, since the bridegroom and the master might not come when expected. Along with Christ's warning that only His Heavenly Father knows the time of His return, it should be obvious why it is impossible to come up with a date for Christ's return.

Also, when we consider the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, we see that their fulfillment is not what many of us would call literal interpretation. For instance, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 that Elijah would return was fulfilled in John the Baptist. In Acts 15:16-18, James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to conclude that the Old Testament prophecy of David's

restored tabernacle was fulfilled by the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel. And who would have ever thought that Hosea 11:1, which refers in the original context to God bringing Israel out of their Egyptian captivity, would by applied by Matthew to refer to Jesus' brief sojourn in Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:14-15)?

While this is not to suggest that we shouldn't diligently search the Scriptures for understanding God's plan for history, it is at the same time a reminder that the details of biblical prophecy are often difficult to ascertain. Acts 1:11 is one of many verses that affirms that Jesus Christ will personally return, but in Acts 1:7 Jesus Himself tells the disciples that instead of focusing on times and dates, they were to focus on the proclamation of the gospel. Those are good words for us today as well.

Our Prophetic Ministry

As we conclude this discussion on the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures, perhaps it would be valuable to consider the *purpose* of prophecy. We frequently assume that prophecy is only concerned with the distant future when in fact many Old Testament prophecies were warnings by the prophet to his own contemporaries about the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, the prophet was often called upon to deliver words of comfort from the Lord. Ultimately, it was the responsibility of the prophet to proclaim the Word of the Lord. Today, the primary responsibility of the church is to proclaim God's Word, the Scriptures. What we have attempted to show in this discussion is that, when interpreting prophecy, we must make a distinction between the explicit teaching of Scripture and inferences based on signs or current events.

Some teachers today seem to be suggesting that the Y2K computer bug will act as a trigger for a worldwide catastrophe that will signal the end times. While we do not want to suggest that any difficulties predicted for the Y2K computer

bug should be easily dismissed, we would do well to place Y2K in proper perspective. Due to the prosperity enjoyed in much of the Western world, it is easy to forget the horrific suffering that Christians in other countries have experienced this century. It has been stated that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. It would be myopic for Western Christians to interpret a downturn in the economy as a signal for the second coming when our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries have been experiencing the type of oppression and suffering most of us cannot even imagine.

However, this is not to discount the possibility that the year 2000 may bring with it a period of relative discomfort. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Y2K computer bug will probably have a significant impact. Some news reports indicate that many smaller nations have failed to even begin addressing the problem. And the United States is certainly not immune from any computer failures either. When we consider how important international trade has become to our economy, there is probably going to be some kind of disruption in our lifestyles; many say we should prepare for the worst.

While this may sound frightening to some, it also points to a tremendous opportunity for the Christian to demonstrate the love of Christ to the world. There will be many people who will be caught unprepared for any disruption in society. Even now there are ministries like Joseph Project 2000 that are gearing up to meet the needs of Christians and non-Christians alike should the situation arise. It is unfortunately true that personal prosperity can often lead to a rejection of God’s provision. Christians need to be willing to share their resources and God’s love with others if in fact there is a breakdown in society. It would appear that the Christian church has a golden opportunity right now to exercise its prophetic ministry of proclaiming God’s Word for this generation. All too often we seem to be waiting for a future

cataclysm where God Himself will act in a most direct way, rather than acknowledging our responsibility to act as His ambassadors to our contemporaries. This is why we must keep in perspective both the imminence *and* the delay of Christ's return. Any delay in the Lord's return is a reminder of God's great mercy and patience, who desires that none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1206-07.

2. CNN.com, "Falwell says Antichrist probably is on Earth now," January 15, 1999.

3. Steve Rabey, "Apocalyptic Sales Out of This World." *Christianity Today* (March 1, 1999), 19.

4. M. E. Dieter, "Adventism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 15-16.

5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 150-153.

6. W. A. Hoffecker, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 292-293.

7. *The Go2Net Network*, January 9, 1999.

8. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), 211 (See the entire chapter on 'The Revelation' for very helpful guidelines for the interpretation of apocalyptic literature.)

9. G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 33-34.

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Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching

“postmoderns” for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, The Death of Truth, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. “It’s not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture,” he claims, “it’s just more difficult.” Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today’s postmoderns.

Xenos’ “Conversation and Cuisine” gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it’s not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include “To judge or not to judge,” “Forgiveness in relationships,” “Views of the afterlife,” and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide “OK” or “bad.” Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today’s “tolerate all viewpoints” mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler’s Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members

can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God’s Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God’s truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter’s New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother’s death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

“The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers,” Kellie recalls. “These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that.” Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy (“Germ”) Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him “great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ” plus “an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert).” Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at www.xenos.org.

Spreading the Passion

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

"Ephesians tells us to equip the church," he notes. "People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home." He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song's leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as "Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset." Monthly men's breakfasts may deal with "Evidences for the Resurrection" or "Is Jesus the Only Way?" New Song has also invited faculty from the International School of Theology to teach courses on "Developing a Christian World View" and other theological topics.

"I'm trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching," Haraksin explains. "As I identify them, I'm trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders."

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. “I had no idea how to respond to him,” Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah’s Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah’s Witness members showed up at Jeff’s door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. “I was very uncomfortable at first,” Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience “taught me why I believe what I believe,” Jeff remembers. “Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn’t have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively.” He continues to apply what he’s learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no interest.

“There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church,” Haraksin notes. People want to know “Why can’t I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?” Society is on information overload, and some “people don’t want to take the time to read and study,” which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus’ deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song’s “Jesus Under Fire” class, which she did. She could ask

questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

“We’re relational people in a relational culture,” Haraksin notes. We’re still learning.” This product of his own church’s equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity’s truth. Sunday schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall’s apologetics emphasis is “Issues and Answers,” monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L’Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L’Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: “If God is good, where did evil come from?”

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered “deconstructionism” and literary analysis as

they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the "Issues and Answers" format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. "The idea," he explains, "was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that."

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals' crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

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Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

Rick Wade provides a succinct summary of the persecution suffered by the early church in the first three centuries and how the church grew stronger as a result of this attention. He suggests that we should be prepared to face similar trials as our culture becomes less tolerant of true Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they *did* do and *didn't* do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"{3}

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism

and incest.{4}

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition."{5} A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.{6}

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."{7}

Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.*Nero*

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.{8} But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.{9} In A.D. 62 his had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero

started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.{10} Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."{11} Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since….A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.{14}

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.{15}

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.{16}Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?{17}

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and

gave proof by invoking pagan gods.{18}

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."{20}

Hadrian

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant,{21} required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to use mere clamorous demands and outcries" as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians "merely for the sake of libelling [*sic*] them," the governor was to "proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt."{22} There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."{23} Philip Schaff tells us that "he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion."{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor ("the personal embodiment of the sovereign state"{25}). "It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,…Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact

loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as 'Lord.'"{26}

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.{27} After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.{28}

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.{29}

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians."{30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy….Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."{31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what

the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.{32} In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters.{33} "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil."{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina "strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ."{35} "At last," Schaff tells us, "the people grew weary of slaughter," and the persecutions died down.{36}

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."{37}

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being

thrown to wild animals at a public festival.{42}

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few shorts years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.{43}

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions.{44} Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform.{45} Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death.{46} Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."{47} Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.{48} Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman

Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.{49}

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co- regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death."{50} A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, "and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine."{51} As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: "All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed"{52} against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians.{53} He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor

of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."{54} Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our worldview was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.{55} So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a "climate of

hate." Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? "Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too." By God's grace we don't endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.{56}

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let's not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973),165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.

4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.
6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica,* "Nero," by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.
11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs,* trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.

32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.
35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
39. Schaff, 57.
40. Bruce, 179.
41. Schaff, 58.
42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.
43. Ibid., 60.
44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.
45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology,* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.
55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

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