

Christian Psychology: Is Something Missing?

The Church as a Healing Community

Worldviews shape the way we think. Psychology, once an outsider both to the sciences and most people's experience, has become a worldview for many people today. Evolutionary psychology, the view that our long evolution from animal to human has deeply imprinted all our behavior, is gaining acceptance on a rapidly widening scale. Psychology is often used to provide an explanation for everything from our "religious aspirations" to our behavior as consumers. How should a Christian view psychology, and what does psychology offer the believer? This essay will consider only one small part of the answer to those questions.

While specifically Christian counseling was once rare in the church, today it is a recognized part of many churches. As Christian counseling has become more widespread, some see it as the answer for the struggles that seem to plague most of us. The therapeutic worldview sees many of our problems and struggles in life as stemming from unresolved problems arising in childhood. The cataloging and diagnosis of psychological disorders has become widespread, both within the church and in the culture at large. Professional counselors are seen as the primary way of dealing with these disorders. How many of us, when faced with someone enduring an ugly divorce, or hounded by problems of self-guilt, or struggling with their self-image, don't think, "This person needs to see a counselor"?

Larry Crabb has done much to bring counseling into the American church. Having written books for more than 23 years, Crabb has always seen the church as being central in the counseling process. He has trained many of the counselors

working in churches today. He has written books, taught, founded schools, and lectured around the country on Christian psychology. He has successfully questioned the church's distrust of psychology.

Now Larry Crabb is asking a new question: Is the common, therapeutic model of Christian psychology really right? Should the church depend on mental health professionals to do all but minor, pat-on-the-back, words-of-cheer kinds of counseling? Is counseling really a matter of education and degrees and specialized training?

While being very clear that professional Christian counselors have an important role to play in the Christian community, Crabb is asking, Could we be depending on counselors too much? Could it be that God has given all believers more resources than we think to help one another deal with many of the troubles and struggles we face in daily life?

Going even deeper, Crabb asks the heretical question, Are psychological disorders really at the bottom of most of our struggles? "I conclude," says Crabb, "that we have made a terrible mistake. For most of the twentieth century, we have wrongly defined soul wounds as psychological disorders and delegated their treatment to trained specialists."[\(1\)](#) What he proposes in his book, *Connecting*, is both revolutionary and profound. In giving us new life in Christ, God has put in each of us the power to connect with other believers and to find the good God has put in them. We have the opportunity to heal most wounded souls. This is Larry Crabb's proposal. While he is still solidly behind professional counseling, he has come to see a broader place for healing within the context of Christian relationships. In this essay we will talk about what it means for two people to connect, and how God can use this connection to heal the deepest wounds of life and expose a beautiful vision of God's work in us.

What Is Connecting?

Some people seem to write a new book as often as most of us buy new shoes. And, like shoes, most of those books don't attract too much attention. But when well-known author Larry Crabb questions the very discipline that he helped establish, his book *Connecting* may cause more of a stir.

Christian psychology views human problems as primarily the result of underlying psychological disorders. We may be angry at a teenager's disobedience, but anger is only the symptom of problems buried within us. Stubborn problems may require deeper exploration of our thinking. Counselors are those people who have special training, enabling them to understand the various disorders we struggle with, and how to fix what's wrong.

In this book, Larry Crabb calls this whole picture into question. He describes the most common ways we react to people who are hurting and puts those reactions into two categories: moralistic and psychological. The moralist looks for what scriptures have been disobeyed, rebukes our disobedience, calls us to admit our sin and repent, and sees that we have some sort of accountability in the future. The psychologist listens to us, tries to find out what is wrong internally, and then helps us learn healthier ways of living. This process often takes months of self-exploration to find the roots of our problem, and to chart a course towards self-awareness and better ways of coping with the world.

Could there be another way for people to relate to each other when problems arise? Crabb's suggestion is a powerful one. Could it be, Crabb asks, that God has put within each of us His power, which, when we connect with another person, allows us to find the good that God has already put in them, and to release that good so that they can respond to the good urges God has placed there?

This is the main premise of the book *Connecting*. Coming straight to the point, Crabb says, “The center of a forgiven person is not sin. Neither is it psychological complexity. The center of a person is the capacity to connect.”[\(2\)](#) The gift of salvation gives us the Holy Spirit, Who allows us first to connect with God the Father, and then, on a new and deeper level, with each other. But what is connecting?

Crabb uses an analogy to the Trinity to make his point clear. The Trinity, Crabb writes, is “an Eternal Community of three fully connected persons.”[\(3\)](#) They have delighted in each other for eternity, there is no shadow of envy or minute bit of jealousy between them, and they love to do what is best for each other. Since God made us in His image, we too can enjoy one another, but we must rely on the power of God in us to show us what is good in the other person.

Connecting is so powerful, Crabb says, because it requires that we look past the surface of people and see the new creation God has already begun. Connecting with someone else requires us to look at what a person could be, not just what he is right now. With God’s insight, we look beyond the small amount God may already have done and ask God for a vision of what this person could be like. Connecting finds the spark in someone else and is excited about what it could flame into.

Is professional counseling unnecessary? Of course not, says Crabb. But connecting is a powerful way God uses us to bring out His good in others. What keeps us from doing this more?

What Keeps Us From Connecting?

If connecting is what God has made us for, and if this is what the Holy Spirit equips us to do, then why don’t more of us connect with one another? Larry Crabb’s answer is developed around four analogies. We tend to be either city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers.

City builders are those who know what resources they have and how to use them. They know their strengths, and they have a solid sense of their adequacy to meet whatever lies ahead. City builders want to be in control, and fear that they might be found inadequate. City builders have a hard time connecting with someone else because they are looking for affirmation of themselves, not what is good in another. They can work together with other people towards a common goal, but only if it increases their sense of adequacy.

Martha Stewart, for example, has built an empire on feeding people's desire to be adequate, able to handle any situation. She is in control of her kitchen, her house, her yard, her life. And she is the one who will show us how to bring our lives under control.

God has created us with a desire for good. We want to please others, we want to live in peace, we want to have everything work out right. And in heaven it will. But we are not in heaven, and too often we try to insulate ourselves from the messiness of the world around us. City builders depend on their own resources to bring a sense of control into their lives. Their adequacy comes from themselves and what they can accomplish. But this blocks them from depending on God. God encourages us to seek peace with all men (Rom. 12:18), but at the same time we must realize that following Christ is a path of difficulty, not ease (2 Tim. 3:12). We are being prepared for perfection, but we are not to expect it here on earth. God has prepared a perfect city for us, but we are not to try to create it on our own now (Heb. 11:13-16).

Fire lighters are like those people described in Isaiah 50:10-11. They walk in darkness, but rather than trust in God to guide them by His light, they light their own torches, and set their own fires to see by. Fire lighters, Crabb says, are those people who must have a plan they know will work. Their demand of God is the pragmatist's "Tell me what will work!" Fire lighters trust and hold closely to their plans, so

connecting is hard for them because it would require them to trust God and not know what might happen next. Connecting requires us to give up our plans and expectations so that we can recognize and enjoy God's plans. We can either trust God or trust our own plans, but we cannot do both. It is not wrong to plan, but we must be willing to give up our plans when Jesus does not fit into them in the way that we want. As C.S. Lewis describes Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: "It's not as if he were a tame Lion." [\(4\)](#)

Have you ever known people whose primary efforts in life were directed towards protecting themselves and their children from any difficulties? When safety is your top priority, then you have become a *wall whitewasher*, Crabb says. Wall whitewashers build flimsy walls of protection around themselves and their worlds, and then whitewash them to make them appear stronger than they really are. These people want protection from whatever they fear. They are sure that their lives of dedication to the Lord are a protection from major problems. "Wall whitewashers cannot welcome tribulations as friends. . . Character isn't the goal of a wall whitewasher. Safety is." [\(5\)](#)

Many people who feel God's calling in their lives, also assume that God will take care of them and of their families. And He will, but not always in the way that we imagine. As we raise our children and watch the terrible struggles that seem to overcome so many other young people, we may feel that at least God will protect our own children from such affliction. But if our trust is that our serving the Lord is protecting our family, then we have built up a false sense of security. We are trying to cover our own uncertainty about the future with the whitewash of our own good deeds. God builds us up and shows us our need to depend on Him alone in our tribulations, but we often want to hide ourselves and protect our families from the very misfortunes that God wants to use to strengthen us. We are whitewashing a failing wall when we try to put up a

hedge around ourselves and our families, sure that God will protect us from trouble. Everything that happens in our lives has come through God first, has been “Father-filtered,” as someone once said. But we must depend on the Lord in all circumstances, not just when we feel protected. God loves us perfectly, but His desire is to give us His character, not to protect us from any difficulty. That is why, as James says, we are to greet tribulations as friends, and not with fear.

Crabb’s fourth class of people who thwart God’s purpose in connecting are those he calls *well diggers*. The image comes from Jeremiah 2, where God marvels at the broken, pitiful wells that the Israelites make instead of coming to Him for real, unlimited water. Well diggers are looking for satisfaction on their terms, and they want to escape pain at any cost. The well digger asks, “Do I feel fulfilled?” If the answer is no, then he renews his quest for something that will give even a moment’s pleasure. We judge drug addicts harshly, but what about needing to have a certain position to feel good, or driving a certain kind of car to prove we’re reaching our goals?

Well diggers also are characterized by something that marks our whole first-world culture: the desire for satisfaction now. Well diggers dig their own wells because it often seems faster than the way God is providing water. We want to be filled, and we want it immediately. We live in a fast-everything world. We stand around the microwave oven, wondering why it takes so long to heat a cup of water. Or, more seriously, we wonder why God is taking so long to bring along the right woman or man, so we find our own ways to satisfy our desires, whether in pornography, or cheap sex, or relationships we know can’t last. We want to be satisfied, and if God seems slow, we find our own satisfaction any way we can.

God plans for eternity, and builds to last forever. But it takes time, and patience. If we fulfill our own desires, we

will be like the Samaritan woman at the well: we will soon thirst again. But if we allow God to provide for our thirst, He fills us with living water, and we are filled in ways we could never have known otherwise.

Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall washers, or well diggers, we will never be able to deeply connect with another person until we kill these urges of the flesh, and allow God to strengthen our spirit. What will help us connect with other people?

Finding What God is Doing in Others

To connect with another believer, we “discover what God is up to and join Him in nourishing the life He has already given.” [\(6\)](#) This is why Larry Crabb sees connecting as central to the Gospel. To connect with another Christian is to let the power of the Holy Spirit in you, find the good that God has planted in the spirit of another believer. It requires us to get past our flesh, which Paul instructs us to crucify (Gal. 5:24), so that we can be alive to the Spirit, the one Who makes connection possible. Connecting with someone else is a triumph of the Spirit over my own fleshly desires to control my own life (being a city builder), to create a plan I know will work (fire lighter), to protect myself against the uncertainties of life (wall whitewasher), and to find my own ways to feel good when I want to (well digger). To connect with a fellow believer I must see what God sees in him or her, not just what I can see.

So how do we see as God sees? God’s forgiveness of us provides a clue. Does God forgive me because I am such a nice fellow? No. Does God forgive me because I have such a good heart? No. Am I forgiven because I will always do the right thing in the future? No. God forgives me because He sees Jesus’ death in my place. It must be the same when I look at a fellow Christian. I must see him or her as someone whom God cared enough to die for, and as someone worth the incredible price that Christ

paid on the cross.

Just as God looks past what is bad in my flesh to what He is creating in my spirit, so I must learn to look at other people and find the good that God is working on in them.

Have you ever heard a child learning to play a musical instrument? We don't just listen to the noises coming from the violin or piano or drums. We listen to what is behind the music—the effort, the intensity, the desire to do better, the willingness to work. We listen for the spark that might indicate that this child really connects to music. That is just what we need to look for in one another: the sparks of eternity God has placed in each one of us. We need to look for what God is doing in our friends that can delight us, and make us “jump up and down with excitement” at how wonderfully God is remaking them.

If we would truly connect with someone else, we must also be putting to death the flesh and feeding the spirit. Larry Crabb goes back to an old Puritan phrase, “mortifying the flesh,” to describe what we are to do as we discover urges of the flesh rising up in us. As Crabb emphatically writes: “The disguise [of the flesh] must be ripped away, the horror of the enemy's ugliness and the pain he creates must be seen, not to understand the ugliness, not to endlessly study the pain, but to shoot the enemy.” [\(7\)](#) This is an ongoing war, one we will fight until we are home with Jesus, but alongside this battle to “crucify the flesh” (Gal. 5:24) we must also feed the Spirit. By this Crabb means that we are, as a community of believers, to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). As we put to death the flesh, we are indeed made alive in the Spirit (Rom. 8:10-14).

Discerning a Vision for Others

Larry Crabb's book *Connecting* has two subtitles. The first subtitle is “Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships.”

Earlier, we saw how we are healed as we allow Christ to sweep away all of our own methods of dealing with life. Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers, these are all ways that we try to manage life. Jesus does not ask us to manage our lives. Instead, as a father might take his son through a crowded mall, God asks us to take His hand, and let Him guide us to where He chooses. The urges we need to kill are the very urges that whisper in our ears that we must take care of ourselves.

Remarkably, as we abandon our own techniques for survival, and let God use our lives in His own way, we also find that we can approach others much more openly and honestly. We are free to love people for who they are, not what they can do for us. And this opens up what is one of Larry Crabb's most important ideas. When we look at others the way God does, we begin to see what He is doing to make them new and incredible creations, just as He is doing for us.

The second subtitle for *Connecting* is "A Radical New Vision." It is certainly radical when one of the leading voices for Christian psychology suggests that lay Christians themselves can deal with many of the personal problems they often refer to counselors. But the radical view he has most in mind is a new way we can relate to and view one another.

Crabb's challenge is for us to kill the bad urges in ourselves so that we are able to begin seeing and hearing what God is doing in other people. This will not be just a warm feeling. We discern visions for a person's life; we do not create them.

When a doctor announces "It's a girl!" he is not making her a girl, he is announcing what is already the case. In the same way, Crabb writes, we are, by prayer, listening, and reading God's Word, to discern what God is doing in someone's life and then announce it. And the process of seeing what God is doing in someone's life may not be easy.

Larry Crabb's vision for the church is that we will become communities of people who care desperately about one another, so much that we will let down our guard. People can truly know us, and we can see into them. In this process of connecting with a few other people, we will see God take the power of His Holy Spirit, and use that power to see what another person could be. As we walk with the Lord, and grow in godly wisdom, He enables us to see the good in other believers, and to encourage that good in a way that gives that person a vision of why she is here. It is this vision of who we could be in Christ which can transform each of us. But we must be willing to die daily to who we are on our own, and arise daily to do and say the things that God desires us to do and say. Are you ready for a radical new vision? It will fill your whole world with the power God has put in you to release the good He has put in others. What a calling of hope!

Notes

1. Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), p. 200.
2. Crabb, 38.
3. Crabb, 53.
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 138.
5. Crabb, 121.
6. Crabb, 49.
7. Crabb, 91.

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The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

There is a sense among many people today that the modern era, both in terms of technical and financial prosperity, as well as personal spiritual well-being, is over. There appears to be a general malaise among many people today, and a certain uneasy feeling that the twentieth-century has entered a new phase. Additionally, most believe that this new phase is not a very good one. Many diverse new “communities” such as feminists, gays, pro-choice advocates, pro-life advocates, conservatives, liberals, and various other groups, both religious and non-religious, make up the global village we now live in. These various groups are frequently at odds with one another and more often than not there is a breakdown in communication. This breakdown can be attributed to the lack of a common frame of reference in vocabulary and, more importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in

which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Darwinian naturalism has been one of the chief philosophical revolutions that has gripped the world. And, although few at the time had any idea how much Darwin's ideas would permeate the culture, no one today doubts the far reaching results of that revolution. The Christian church was not ready for the Darwinian revolution, and thus this philosophy was able to gain a foothold (and later a death grip) on every aspect of modern life, both in academic and popular circles. For decades after the revolution, many church leaders thought it unimportant to answer Darwin and said little or nothing about the new philosophy. Most Christians were, therefore, not equipped to provide coherent answers and were too late in entering the debate. The result is that most of our public schools and universities, and even our political lives, are dominated by the erroneous assumption that Darwinian naturalism is scientifically true and that creationism is fictitious.

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is

ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

Historians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and many others use the terms *modern*, *premodern*, and *postmodern* to help them navigate through large pieces of time and thought. In order to understand what these very helpful terms are used for, we will try to understand the premodern period first. The term *premodern* is used to describe the period before the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The premodern period is often referred to as the precritical period—a time before the criteria of truth became so stringent. The premodern period ends somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the high part of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The major thing one should remember is that, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, the Western world was changing forever, and this would have far reaching impact on every aspect of life, especially religion.

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and handwritten texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral

codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that someone had just told you that the world was created by a being that you could not detect with your five senses and that He had left a written communication about His will for your life. You would look around at the world that you lived in, and you would decide if the stories that were told to you explained the world and were reasonably believable. This method for determining truth is called the *correspondence method of truth*. If the story being told corresponds to the observable phenomenon in the world, then the story is accepted as truth. There is also a *coherence method of truth* in operation during this period. The coherence theory would add to the correspondence theory the idea that all of the individual stories told over a period of time should not contradict one another. These two forms of determining whether something is true or not were the primary means of evaluation for many centuries.

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

The Advent of the Modern

We must now leave our discussion of the premodern period and turn our attention to the beginning of the modern period. Some see the modern era as beginning in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; others, however, believe it began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A main tenet of *modernism* is that human reason, armed with the scientific method, is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge about the universe. During the Renaissance men began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of the earth in ever increasing ways. It was a time marked by invention and discovery that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism, or a high confidence in mankind. The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where better telescopes and microscopes allowed men to unlock the secrets of the universe. The unlocking of these secrets led to the initial impression that the universe, and the human body, resembled machines and could be understood in mechanistic terms.

In the eighteenth century the progress of science accelerated so rapidly that it appeared as if science would soon be able to explain everything. Many believed that there were no limits to the power of human reason operating with the data from sense perception. In contrast to the truth of the oral tradition in the premodern era, the modern period accepted as truth only that which could be proven to be true. Many of the philosophers and theologians of the modern period sought to devise a rational religion, a faith that could incorporate all of the considerations and discoveries of the new science.

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how

doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence to the belief that science and the scientific method would one day yield a utopian society. It is easy to see how the optimism of this period became almost intoxicating to many. The so-called-truths of religion were quickly being cast aside in favor of the new, and better, truths found by science. Examples found in advertising may be helpful. A company that wished to sell a car or a pair of tennis shoes would appeal to the scientific truths of their product. That is, a company would attempt to persuade a potential buyer into purchasing its product based on the fact that it was the best item obtainable. Add to this scientific furor, the advancement of Darwinian naturalism, and it is easy to see how religious claims seemed like quaint, antiquated beliefs for many people. The modern period culminated in arrogance concerning human abilities and human reason. It proposed a world created without any assistance from God. The modern period differs from the premodern in its rejection of the supernatural or the transcendent which is based largely on the belief that religious truth claims are different than scientific truth claims. According to many, truth itself had changed.

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three

centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

Modernity may be understood as a time when our best philosophers, theologians, and scientists attempted to make sense out of the world based on the belief in objective reality. One of the central tenets of the era we live in (the postmodern period) is that there is no such thing as objective truth. In fact, the new trend in postmodern thought is to embrace, affirm, and live with philosophical, theological, and even scientific chaos. Earlier we used an example from advertising; suggesting that products were marketed based on their claims to be superior to what a competitor might offer. If we use this example again, postmodern methodology appeals more to a person's feelings than to his or her sense of factual truth. Cars, tennis shoes, and other products are marketed based on image. The best car is not necessarily the one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that

any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

Furthermore, Christians are expected to tolerate contradicting truth claims and to look the other way if certain ethical behaviors (abortion, homosexuality, etc.) do not suit their tastes. The current postmodern condition is only in the early stages of development, not even a half a century old, and yet its devastating effects have penetrated every aspect of our lives. Christians largely responded too late to the threats of Darwinism, and now the destructive effects of that movement are evident to anyone in the Christian community. Postmodernism, and its companion rampant philosophical relativism, should be among the foremost concerns of any Christian who wishes to engage his or her culture and ensure that the gospel of Christ has a fertile context in which it can take root and grow in the future.

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it

is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

When she was pressed on her beliefs concerning reality, the inconsistencies of her philosophy were evident. She stated that everything was a matter of opinion or one's personal perspective. When asked if this belief extended to physical reality, she said it did. She said that a person could look at something in such a way as to alter reality.

The example of the existence or nonexistence of her car was raised. She said that if she believed that her car was not in the parking lot and if another person believed that it was, it could be possible that it actually existed for one person and not for the other. When one first hears something like this, it sounds as if the person who maintains this position is joking, and could not possibly mean for us to take him or her seriously. However, the sad and frightening truth is that this individual is very serious.

This young woman is representative of a large part of our Western culture, men and women who tend to think unsystematically. The result of this way of thinking is that people often hold ideas that are logically inconsistent and contradict each other. The result is that persons professing to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or even atheists are given equal degrees of credibility. Truth has become a function of personal preference, not correspondence to objective reality.

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is

often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God's existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

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The Christian Mind

The Need for a Christian Mind

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17)(1) This familiar admonition was first spoken by John the Baptist and soon after it was echoed by Jesus. The phrase is certainly worthy of a great deal of attention; it provides a lot of food for thought. For the moment, though, let’s concentrate on the first word: *Repent*. This expression is a central portion of the doctrines concerning sin and salvation. Literally it refers to a *change of mind*. It does not mean that one is to be sorry for some action. Thus, the first hearers were admonished to realize that they were

in need of radical change before a holy God, beginning with their minds. They were to turn from sin to God by changing their thinking. Certainly the same holds true for us. Most of us are in need of reminders that lead us back to one of the crucial aspects of our salvation: repentance, or a change in our thinking. In addition, we should couple such memories with the realization that our changed minds should always be alive to God. To paraphrase Kepler's famous phrase, we are to "think God's thoughts after Him." Since the Christian life is all-inclusive, the mind is included.

But, some may ask, do we actually have a mind? Current research and thought in the fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology concludes that we are much too free with the word *mind*. Perhaps we should get used to making reference to the brain, rather than the mind.

"Some neuroscientists are beginning to suspect that everything that makes people human is no more than an interaction of chemicals and electricity inside the labyrinthine folds of the brain."(2) E.O.

Wilson, the father of what is called sociobiology, proposes that we can determine an ethical system based on scientifically observable evidence. He writes, "The empiricist argument holds that if we explore the biological roots of moral behavior, and explain their material origins and biases, we should be able to fashion a wise and enduring ethical consensus."(3) Thus, ethics are not to be found external to physical reality; there is no mind through which we can respond ethically. It seems that Wilson and those who are like-minded believe "the mind is headed for an ignoble fate.

Just as the twinkle of stars was reduced to nuclear explosions, and life itself to biochemical

reactions, so the brain may one day be explained by the same forces that run the rest of the universe.”(4)

Such perspectives should come as no surprise if we are aware of the permeation of a naturalistic worldview in both the physical and social sciences. The Christian, though, is not relegated to this type of reduction. A biblical worldview makes it clear that we are more than physical beings; we are also non-physical beings made in God’s image. As a popular joke from the nineteenth century says:

What’s the matter?

Never mind.

What is mind?

No matter.(5)

The truth of the joke should not be lost on those of us who claim to be followers of Christ. We should realize the importance of cultivating Christian minds. As the great statesman Charles Malik stated, “As Christ is the Light of the World, his light must shine and be brought to bear upon the problem of the formation of the mind.”(6)

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 1)

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). Imagine you are in a courtroom. You are the defense attorney; the prosecutor is God Himself. He has just invited you, Judah’s attorney, to engage in debate concerning the case at hand which happens to focus on the crimes of your client. Indeed, He wants the two of you to *reason together*. That is the scenario

presented in this famous passage from the first chapter of Isaiah. God was inviting Judah to debate a case in court.(7) What a remarkable idea! And what a stunning statement concerning the importance of the mind. God was calling upon His people to use their minds to see if they could engage Him in debate concerning their sins.

In a time when the mind appears to be denigrated at every hand, such a passage should serve to reawaken us to the importance of using the minds God has given us. After all, the Bible, which most Christians claim to be the very word of God, calls the mind to attention throughout its pages. As J.P. Moreland states, "If we are going to be wise, spiritual people prepared to meet the crises of our age, we must be a studying, learning community that values the life of the mind."(8) Let's begin such studying and learning by considering some of what the Bible says about the ungodly and rebellious mind, and then the godly mind.

First, the ungodly mind is described in terms that are sobering. When we apply these phrases to the culture around us, we can better understand why what we see and hear disturbs us. For example, Romans 1:18-28 describes what one scholar called "The Night." Here are some of the ways unbelievers' minds are depicted in this dark passage:

- Suppressing the truth
- Rejecting God
- Foolish speculations
- Foolish hearts
- Professing wisdom
- Exchanging God for a counterfeit
- Lustful hearts
- Exchanging truth for a lie

- Worshipping the creature
- Degrading passions
- Exchanging the natural for the unnatural
- Committing indecent acts
- Depraved minds

Another somber statement about the ungodly way of thinking is found in 2 Corinthians 4:4: "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Perhaps you have had conversations with unbelievers that were characteristic of such "blindness." The person with whom you were talking just didn't see it as you attempted to share the truth of Christ. Such responses should not surprise us.

A foolish mind also is described frequently in Scripture. Jeremiah 4:22 is a strong indictment of those who know the things of God, but foolishly reject them:

*For My people are foolish,
They know Me not;
They are stupid children,
And they have no understanding.
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know.*

Hosea 4:6 shows the result of God's reaction when His people reject the truth:

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest.*

These ancient proclamations could not be more contemporary. May we heed their warnings!

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 2)

“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). When the apostle Paul wrote these words, he was very aware of the need for a Christian mind. Philosophical speculations abounded in his time, just as in our time. Thus he described the Christian’s mental responsibility in terms of warfare. The Christian mind is active—it enters the battle; it is filled with the knowledge of God—it is prepared for battle; it puts all things under the lordship of Christ—it follows the only true commander into battle. And that battle has been won innumerable times, even in the minds of brilliant people. “One of the most astonishing and undeniable arguments for the truth of [Christianity] . . . is the fact that . . . some of the most subtle of human intellects have been led to render submission to the Saviour.”(9) The Bible contains many such insights into the nature of a Christian mind. We will consider two of these.

Reason is a term that is descriptive of the Christian mind. This does not mean that a Christian is to be a rationalist, but rather he is to use reason based on the reason of God found in Scripture. For example, on one of several occasions Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus to test Him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus responded by referring to their ability to discern signs of certain kinds of weather. Then He said, “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3)? Obviously He was noting how people use reason to arrive at conclusions, but the Christian mind would

conclude the things of God. The book of Acts indicates that the apostle Paul used reason consistently to persuade his hearers of the truth of his message. Acts 17:2-3 states that "according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths *reasoned* [emphasis added] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." For two years in Ephesus Paul was "reasoning [emphasis added] daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). In light of the fact that our contemporary world attempts to reject reason, such examples should spur us to hold out for the possibility of reasonable dialogue with those around us. After all, those who reject reason must use reason to reject reason.

If the Christian mind is characterized by reason, such reason must be founded upon knowledge from God. Upon reflection of their conversation with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, two of the disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us" (Luke 24:32)? The word *hearts* in this passage refers to both moral and mental perception. In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, "we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28). And in his Ephesian letter he wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" (Eph. 1:18-19). May this beautiful prayer apply to us as we consider how to use our God-given minds!

Mandates for the Mind

“AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” (Mark 12:30). These words have echoed for thousands of years, beginning with Moses and leading to Jesus. They contain the first of what I call *Mandates for the Mind*: Strive to Know God. To love someone we must know him or her. In the case of my wife, for instance, it would have been absurd to declare that I loved her before ever meeting her. My love for her implies an intimate knowledge *about* and knowledge *of* her. In the same manner we are to strive both to know *about* God and to *know* Him intimately. Our minds are crucial to this mandate. It is my contention that one of the major problems in contemporary Christianity is that too many of us are attempting know God without using our minds to investigate what He has told us of Himself in Scripture.

The second mandate is that the Christian mind should strive for truth. “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” (John 8:31-32). Abiding in His word implies a continual dedication to using the mind to search the Scriptures, the place where His truth is written.

The third mandate pertains to maturity. Romans 12:2 declares: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God

is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." It is pertinent to note that the words *conformed*, *transformed*, and *prove* refer to continuous action. Thus, the Christian mind is to be characterized by continuous development toward maturity. Hebrews 5:14 refers to Scripture as "solid food" as the writer describes the mature mind. He then asserts that the Christian is to "press on [continually] to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). Such maturity is a strategic need in the contemporary church.

The fourth mandate involves proclaiming and defending the faith. The maturing Christian mind will actively engage the minds of those around him. For example, Paul modeled this while in Athens: "[H]e was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him" (Acts 17:17-18). Paul proclaimed and defended the truth of the gospel in the synagogue with his own people, among the populace, and even with the intellectual elite of the time. Such encounters are easily duplicated in our day.

The fifth mandate refers to the need for study. Philippians 4:8 states: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Note the final phrase: "let your mind dwell," a clause indicative of the need for concentration, or study. The phrase also includes a command that such study is to be continuous. We are to ponder, or think

on the things of God.

Applying the Christian Mind

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

This exhortation from the book of James includes the last of our *Mandates for the Mind*.

That is, the Christian mind should be applied; what is in the mind should flow to the feet.

It would be easy to state that such a mandate applies to all of life and let that suffice, but specific examples can help us focus on how this works. Thus we will focus on three contrived stories.

Our first story involves a fellow we will call Billy. Billy is an excellent softball player. Three nights per week he plays for his company team. He has a reputation as a fierce competitor who will do virtually anything to win. He also has a volatile temper that explodes in ways that embarrass his family and teammates. On some occasions he even has had shoving and cursing bouts with opposing players. Each Sunday, and even on other occasions, he attends a well-known church in his city. One Sunday his pastor shared an exceptional sermon based on 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Upon hearing this message, he suddenly realized that softball games could not be isolated from his commitment to Christ. Whether in his business, his family, or his softball games he needed to stop and think: if he is a temple of God, all of life is a sacred task. His life, including softball, was never the same.

The second story focuses on a woman named Sally. She is a

teacher in a public elementary school who is also a young Christian. Her new life in Christ has invigorated her to the point that she is beginning to think of ways she can share her joy with her students. She decides that at every opportunity she will encourage the children to discover the wonder of life. As she guides them through science, she expresses awe as they investigate the simplest flower, or the profundity of the solar system. As she discusses arithmetic she encourages them to realize the beauty of logical order in numbers. As she reads stories to them she gently emphasizes the amazing concept of human imagination. In these ways and others Sally begins to realize the excitement of using her mind for God's glory. In addition, she soon finds that she is having conversations with her students that give her opportunities to share the One who is guiding her.

Our third story concerns Steven, a businessman and father of an eight-year-old boy. Steven has come to the realization that his son, Jimmy, spends most of his time either watching television or playing computer games. So he begins to consider ways to stimulate Jimmy's thinking. Since he also wants to see Jimmy come to faith in Christ, Steven suggests that they read C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* together. Soon, the two of them are delighting in these tales, and Steven finds ways to discuss the spiritual metaphors in Lewis' classic fantasies.

These stories may not apply directly to your life at this time. But, hopefully they will stimulate a broader understanding of how your mind can be used for God's glory within the routines of life.

Notes

1. All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Version.
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8. J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997), 39.
9. R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 135.

Art and the Christian

How should Christians think about art from a framework that starts with the Bible? The concept that people are made in God's image is reflected in the fact and the content of the art we produce.



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

Art in our Lives

Where are you as you read this? You may be sitting in an office, reclining in a lounge chair at home, lounging in your back yard, sitting at a desk in your dorm room, or any other of a number of scenarios. Consider for a moment if art is part of your consciousness. If you are sitting in an office, is art anywhere within your vision? If you are reclining in a lounge chair, does the furniture have an artistic dimension? If you are lounging in your back yard, can the word art be used to describe any facet of what you see? If you are in your dorm room, are you listening to music that is art?

If I had the pleasure of dialoguing with you in regard to these questions, no doubt we would have a very interesting conversation. Some of you may say, "No, art doesn't describe anything I see at the moment." Or, some of you may state, "I haven't thought of this before. You'll have to give me more time for reflection." Others may assert, "I only think of art within museums, concert halls or other such places that enshrine our art." Others may say, "Yes, art is very much a part of my daily life." But since I can't dialog with you in order to know what you are doing at the moment, and I certainly cannot see what you see, let me tell you where I am and what I see as I write these comments. I am sitting in my study at my desk while I am listening to the music of Bach. I see a clock on one of the bookshelves, a hand-painted plate I purchased in the country of Slovenia, a framed poem given to

me by my daughter, several chairs, two floor lamps, a mirror with a bamboo frame, two canoe paddles I bought in the San Blas islands off the coast of Panama, a wooden statue I purchased in Ecuador, and a unique, colorful sculpture that was made by my son. As I mention these things, perhaps you are attempting to imagine them. You are trying to “see” or “hear” them and in so doing there are certain of these items you may describe as art. Your first response may be to say that the music of Bach, the hand-painted Slovenian plate, or the Ecuadorian statue can be described as art. But what about the chair in which I am sitting, the desk, the bookshelves, the chairs, or the lamps? Better yet, what about such items that are found where you live? Are they art?

Such questions are indicative of the challenges we face when we begin to consider the place of art in our lives. As an evangelical Christian I can state that art and the aesthetic dimensions of life have not received much attention within my formal training. Only through my own pursuit have I begun to think about art with a Christian worldview. And I have found my experience is similar to what many have experienced within the evangelical community. Too often we have tended to label art as inconsequential or even detrimental to the Christian life.

Actually, there is nothing new about this. Our spiritual forefathers debated such issues. They were surrounded by Greek and pagan cultures that challenged them to give serious thought to how they should express their new beliefs. Art surrounded them, but could the truth of Christ be expressed legitimately through art? Could Christians give positive attention to the art of non-Christians? In light of such struggles it is my intention to encourage you to give attention to some of the basic elements of a Christian worldview of art and aesthetics in this essay. I believe you will find that our discussion can have significant application in your life.

Art and Aesthetics

Several years ago I was having dinner with a group of young people when our conversation turned to the subject of music. During the discussion I made a comment about how I believe there is a *qualitative* difference between the music of Bach and that of a musician who was popular among Christians at the time of our discussion. When one of the group at our table heard this, he immediately responded in anger and accused me of flagrant prejudice and a judgmental spirit. Even though I attempted to elaborate my point, the young man had determined that I was an elitist and would not listen any longer.

This incident serves as a reminder that one of the most prevalent ways of approaching art is to simply say that “beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder.” The incident also serves to show that concepts of “good” and “bad,” or “beautiful” and “ugly,” or other adjectives, are part of our vocabulary when we talk of art. This is true whether we believe such terms apply only to individuals or everyone. The vocabulary pertains to a field of philosophy called aesthetics.

All of us deal with aesthetics at various times in our lives, and many of us incorporate aesthetic statements in daily conversations. For example, we may say, “That was a *great* movie.” Or, “That was a *terrible* movie.” When we make such statements we normally don’t think seriously about how such terms actually apply to what we have seen. We are stating our opinions, but those opinions are usually the result of an immediate emotional response. The challenge comes when we attempt to relate *qualitative* statements about the movie as part of a quest to find universal guidelines that can be applied to all art. When we accept this challenge we begin to explain why some artists and their art is great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile.

Aesthetics and Nature

Perhaps one of the clearest ways to begin to understand the aesthetic dimension of our lives is to consider how we respond to nature. Have you ever heard anyone say, “That’s an *ugly* sunset.” Probably not, but surely you have heard the word *beautiful* applied to sunsets. And when you hear the phrase “beautiful sunset” you probably don’t hear an argument to the contrary. Usually there is a consensus among those who see the sunset: it is beautiful. From a Christian perspective those who are there are offering a judgment concerning both the “artist” and the “art.” Both the “cause” and “effect” have been praised aesthetically. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, as well as sunsets routinely evoke human aesthetic response. The Christian knows that the very fabric of the universe expresses God’s presence with majestic beauty and grandeur. Psalm 19:1 states, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork.” Nature has been called the “aesthetics of the infinite.” Through telescope or microscope, one can devote a lifetime to the study of some part of the universe—the skin, the eye, the sea, the flora and fauna, the stars, the climate. All of nature can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities which find their source in God, their Creator. In fact, we can assert that “the major premise of a Christian worldview, including a Christian aesthetic, is that God is the Creator.”(1)

Human Creativity

“You have a wonderful imagination! Are you an artist?” Has anyone said such things to you? If so, perhaps you responded by saying something that would reject the person’s perception of you. Most of us don’t see ourselves as imaginative, artistic people. Indeed, most of us tend to think of the artist and imagination as terms that apply only to certain elite individuals who have left a legacy of work. “The truth is that in discussing the arts we are discussing something

universal to mankind.”(2) For example, anthropologists tell us all primitive peoples thought art was important.(3) Why is this true?

From the perspective of a Christian worldview the answer is found in how we are created. Since we are made in God’s image that must include the glorious concept that we too are creative. After creating man, God told him to subdue the earth and rule over it. Adam was to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) which was described by God as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The implication of this is very important. God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of “creation” with Him. He has permitted humans to take the elements of His cosmos and create new arrangements with them. Perhaps this explains the reason why creating anything is so fulfilling to us. We can express a drive within us which allows us to do something all humans uniquely share with their Creator.

God has thus placed before the human race a banquet table rich with aesthetic delicacies. He has supplied the basic ingredients, inviting those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest extent possible. We are privileged as no other creature to make and enjoy art.

There is a dark side to this, however, because sin entered and affected all of human life. A bent and twisted nature has emerged, tainting every field of human endeavor or expression and consistently marring the results. The unfortunate truth is that divinely-endowed creativity will always be accompanied in earthly life by the reality and presence of sin expressed through a fallen race. Man is Jekyll and Hyde: noble image-bearer and morally-crippled animal. His works of art are therefore bittersweet.

Understanding this dichotomy allows Christians to genuinely appreciate something of the contribution of every artist,

composer, or author. God is sovereign and dispenses artistic talents upon whom He will. While Scripture keeps us from emulating certain lifestyles of artists or condoning some of their ideological perspectives, we can nevertheless admire and appreciate their talent, which ultimately finds its source in God.

The fact is that if God can speak through a burning bush or Balaam's donkey, He can speak through a hedonistic artist! The question can never be how worthy is the vessel, but rather has truth been expressed? God's truth is still sounding forth today from the Bible, from nature, and even from fallen humanity.

Because of the Fall, absolute beauty in the world is gone. But participation in the aesthetic dimension reminds us of the beauty that once was, and anticipates its future luster. With such beauty present today that can take one's breath away, even in this unredeemed world, one can but speculate about what lies ahead for those who love Him!

Art and the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). We are to offer Him the best that we have—intellectually, artistically, and spiritually. Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the *Incarnation* ("the Word made flesh"), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real Man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of "other- worldly-ness" that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul's statement, "Unto the pure, all things are pure" (Titus

1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by God, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the artistic dimension. Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the tabernacle and eventually the temple. Here we find something unique in history art works conceived and designed by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Poetry is another evidence of God's love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament, including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, portions of the prophets, and Job contain poetry. Since God inspired the very words of Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages.

Music and dance are often found in the Bible. In Exodus 15 the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5 we find musicians in the temple, their instruments specifically made by King David for praising God. And we should remember that the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

The New Testament

The New Testament also includes artistic insights. The most obvious is the example of Jesus Himself. First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest,

the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master story-teller. He readily made use of His own cultural setting to impart His message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories, but they were nevertheless used to teach spiritual truths via the imagination.

We should also remember that the entire Bible is not only revelation, it is itself a work of art. And this work of art “has been the single greatest influence on art. It sheds more light upon the creative process and the use of the arts than any other source, because in it are found the great truths about man as well as God that are the wellsprings of art.”(4)

Evaluating Art

Can the Bible help us evaluate art? Consider the concepts found in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

Let’s concentrate for a few moments on this verse in order to see if it might at least provide the beginning of a framework for the evaluation and enjoyment of art.

Paul begins with *truth*. When considering art the Christian is compelled to ask, “Is this really true?” Does life genuinely operate in this fashion in light of God’s revelation? And Christians must remember that truth includes the negatives as well as the positives of reality.

The second word refers to the concept of *honor* or *dignity*. This can refer to what we related earlier in this essay about the nature of man: we have dignity even though we are sinful. This gives a basis, for example, to reject the statements in

the work of the artist Francis Bacon. Bacon painted half-truths. He presented deterioration and hopeless despair, but he didn't present man's honor and dignity.

The third key to aesthetic comprehension has to do with the moral dimension—what is *right*. Not all art makes a moral statement, but when it does Christians must deal with it, not ignore it. For example, Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, is a powerful moral statement protesting the bombing by the Germans of a town by that name just prior to World War II. Protesting injustice is a cry for justice.

Purity is the fourth concept. It also touches on the moral— by contrasting that which is innocent, chaste, and pure from that which is sordid, impure, and worldly. For instance, one need not be a professional drama critic to identify and appreciate the fresh, innocent love of *Romeo and Juliet*, nor to distinguish it from the erotic escapades of a *Tom Jones*.

While the first four concepts have dealt with facets of artistic statements, the fifth focuses on sheer beauty: "Whatever is *lovely*." If there is little to evaluate morally and rationally, we are still free to appreciate what is beautiful in art.

The sixth concept, that of *good repute*, gives us impetus to evaluate the life and character of the artist. The less than exemplary lifestyle of an artist may somewhat tarnish his artistic contribution, but it doesn't necessarily obliterate it. The greatest art is true, skillfully expressed, imaginative, and unencumbered by the personal and emotional problems of its originators.

Excellence is yet another concept. It is a comparative term; it assumes that something else is not excellent. The focus is on quality, which is worth much discussion. But one sure sign of it is craftsmanship: technical mastery. Another sign is durability. Great art lasts.

The last concept is *praise*. Here we are concerned with the impact or the effect of the art. Great art can have power and is therefore a forceful tool of communication. Herein lies the “two-edged swordness” of art. It can encourage a culture to lofty heights, and it can help bring a culture to ruin. Paul undergirds this meaty verse by stating that we should let our minds “dwell on these things,” a reminder that Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance even in the artistic realm.

Thus it is my hope that we will pursue the artistic dimensions of our lives with intelligence and imagination. The world needs to see and hear from Christians committed to art for the glory of God.

Notes

1. C. Nolan Huizenga, “The Arts: A Bridge Between the Natural and Spiritual Realms,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 70.
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Frank E. Gaebelin, “Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 48-49.

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The New Absolutes

William Watkins’ book The New Absolutes says that Americans are not relativists, we’re actually absolutists. Rather than abandoning absolutes, we’re adopting new ones in place of the

old.

Reality in the Balance

When Christians take a stand on a given moral issue—on abortion, for instance—what are some typical responses? Someone might say, “What right do you have to push *your* morality on the rest of us?” Or, “Abortion might be wrong for you, but it’s not for me.”

What these people are implying is that such beliefs are *relative*; that is, they are related to something else—an individual’s desires or circumstances, for example. Because people change through time, however, something that is true or good for a person today might not be so tomorrow. Nothing is true or good for all people at all times.

Have you noticed, however, that many of the same people who claim that truth and morality are relative can be found denouncing certain political views, or actively pushing the social acceptance of a formerly rejected lifestyle, or fighting for new rights in one area or another?

Author William Watkins *has* noticed, and he’s recorded his thoughts in a new book titled, *The New Absolutes*. Watkins believes that despite the rhetoric, Americans are in fact *not* relativists; we are in reality *absolutists*. He says that, rather than *abandoning* absolutes, we are simply adopting *new* ones to replace the *old*.

It is now believed, Watkins says, “that truth and error, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal, and a host of other judgments are determined by the individual, . . . circumstances, or . . . culture. . . . There is no transcendent God or universal natural law we can point to that can inform us about who we are, what our world is like, and how we should get along in it.”

What is the source of this thinking? Watkins points to three

elements: a loss of belief in absolute truth, a strong belief in tolerance, and a detachment from people and institutions as a result of pessimism and distrust.

If Americans have concluded that ideas and morals are relative, however, why does Watkins say Americans are really absolutists? We are betrayed, he says, by our behavior.

Evidence that Watkins is right is seen in the glut of lawsuits in the courts, calls for law and order in politics, moral outrage over various offenses, cries for human rights, and the spreading of liberal democratic ideas to other countries. Americans have an idea of what is right, and we think others should agree with us. This is not relativism.

More significant, though, is how an absolutist mentality is seen in those who typically espouse relativism. For example, those who scream the loudest for *tolerance* often restrict others to saying and doing only what is politically correct. In the name of *pluralism* secularists push religion out of the public square. And *multiculturalists* condemn the West for its cultural practices. It seems that what is sauce for the goose is *not* sauce for the gander.

The average American who has come to accept relativistic notions of truth and morality might fairly be accused of being only inconsistent. But those who are real activists in the current fight for cultural change must bear the charge of blatant hypocrisy.

Old Absolutes vs. New Absolutes

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins contrasts ten traditional beliefs (old absolutes) with the ten beliefs that are replacing them (new absolutes). Though these new beliefs might not be “absolutes” in a strict, philosophical sense, they *function* as absolutes in contemporary society.

In this essay I’ll look at three issues Watkins discusses—pro-

life versus pro-death beliefs, religion in the public square, and political correctness and tolerance—to see if, indeed, the social activists mentioned earlier are really the relativists they claim to be. As we consider these topics, I think you'll come to agree with Watkins that the culture war is not being fought between absolutists and relativists, but between two groups of absolutists.

Death: What a Beautiful Choice

First, let's consider the pro-life versus pro-death question.

According to Watkins, the *old* absolute was: "Human life from conception to natural death is sacred and worthy of protection." The *new* absolute is: "Human life, which begins and ends when certain individuals or groups decide it does, is valuable as long as it is wanted."

Two issues which bring this new belief to the fore are *abortion* and *physician-assisted suicide*. Few practices are as fiercely opposed or defended as abortion. Opponents say abortion is morally wrong for all people. Proponents say it is a matter of individual choice. Physician-assisted suicide draws similar responses.

It is easy to overstate the thinking of those espousing the new absolute of the value of life. Probably very few would say that they "love death" or would think of death as a "good" thing ranking up there, say, with riches and great health and freedom. Rather, death is more often thought of simply as the lesser of two evils.

Nevertheless, there *are* many who think of death as a positive thing, as something to be embraced, as the best answer to suffering or to certain hardships of life that many people experience.

Whether they think of death as a good thing or not, however, they think of it as a right not to be tampered with. It is

rooted, they say, in a Constitutional “right to privacy.”

In claiming this right, however, any foundation in relativistic thinking must be abandoned. For the very “right” proponents claim is itself an *absolute*. They are saying that the right of individuals to decide for themselves should be observed by everyone else. When they say it is wrong for pro-lifers to try to press their beliefs on others, they are stating an absolute. If they say that the value of human life is a matter of its quality rather than of intrinsic worth, they are stating another absolute.

Some relativists will try to wriggle out of the charge of absolutism by saying that their position might be right for now but not necessarily for all times and all places. Nonetheless, their ideas about the value of human life and the option of death as a solution to human suffering function as absolutes in our society today.

Watkins is correct. The stubbornness of abortion advocates and assisted-suicide proponents in defending their “rights” is good evidence for the claim that Americans, despite all the talk, are not relativists after all.

Freedom From Religion

It used to be held that “religion is the backbone of American culture, providing the moral and spiritual light needed for public and private life.” Now, according to Watkins, we have a *new* absolute: “Religion is the bane of public life, so for the public good it should be banned from the public square.”

Certainly there are those who are this adamant about the place of religion. These are the ones who raise a fuss when a prayer is uttered at a public school graduation ceremony or who complain when a nativity scene is set up on public property at Christmas.

Probably the majority of Americans are not this combative

about the issue. However, for a variety of reasons many believe religion should be kept separate from public life .

One reason is a misunderstanding of the First Amendment. We have been told over and over again that the separation of church and state requires that the government must not be involved with religious matters in any way. The new absolute is this: religion and public policy should be kept separate.

We don't often notice, however, that strict "separationists" do not talk much about our nation's beginnings. A study of our founding documents shows that religion was an integral part of Americans' lives; references to the Bible and Christian beliefs are often cited in the construction of our new government. Amazingly enough, the writers of the Constitution did not see in it the "wall of separation" current interpreters do.

Another reason people think religion should be kept a private matter is a misunderstanding about religion itself. Having been "schooled" in relativistic thinking, many (perhaps most) Americans believe that whatever they believe is true *for them*, but not necessarily for other people.

But this cannot be so. Religions provide an explanation of what is ultimately *real*. Either there is one true God or there is not. Either there is salvation through Jesus, or there is enlightenment through meditation, or there is some other way to find fulfillment. Not all of these can be true *in reality*.

This issue gets really tangled up when we bring in the matter of rights. The idea that everyone has the right to worship as he or she chooses has been transformed to mean that each person's choice of religion is true. "I have the right to believe as I wish" becomes "My belief is as true as yours." The fact that I believe something makes it true.

But is that how things work in other areas of life? If I believe that I am a millionaire, does that make me one? With

respect to religion, does believing there is a God put Him there? Or does believing there is no God produce a god-less universe?

The new absolutism with respect to religion is a very real concern for many Americans. As Christians we are taught that our beliefs have meaning for all of life, not just for the prayer closet, yet bringing such beliefs out into the public arena has brought some Christians great difficulty.

It is ironic that, in a nation which began with a strong desire for the free expression of religious beliefs, people are now being forced more and more to leave their beliefs at home.

Does this sound like relativism to you?

The Politically Correct Life

The hypocrisy of the new absolutism is seen more clearly than anywhere else in what is now called “political correctness” or PC for short.

To be politically correct is to be in line with certain ideals promoted by the new cultural reformers, ideals such as abortion rights, multiculturalism, gender feminism, and homosexual rights. To say or do anything which goes against these ideals is to be politically incorrect.

It is easier to understand PC if we think of it as the end of a chain of thinking.

First is the acceptance of relativism, the idea that there are no absolutes. This belief, taken with our democratic idea of equality, results in the belief that everyone’s beliefs and choices are equal or equally valid. There should be no discrimination against other beliefs or lifestyles. This is the *new tolerance*, the prime virtue of the new reformers.

When history is viewed from this perspective, it seems clear that history is the story of the strong taking advantage of the weak. The weak—or disadvantaged—are victims who now require extra help to attain their rightful place of equality. Merely belonging to a victimized group is enough to expect this extra help regardless of whether a given individual has been victimized. The advantaged must now be sensitive to the “needs” of the disadvantaged to avoid making them feel any more victimized and must work to protect their rights. Finally, the advantaged must not do or say anything which could be interpreted as differentiating the disadvantaged, of showing them as different in a negative way. Being sensitive to the plight of the “oppressed” and avoiding doing or saying anything which might make them feel marginalized or inadequate or looked down upon . . . this is *political correctness*.

It is certainly true that there have been and are people who oppress others. This must be opposed. The problem with political correctness, however, lies in over-correcting the wrong.

For example, in *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins lists some words some real estate agents learn to shun in an effort to avoid offending potential buyers. *Executive* has racist overtones since most executives are white. *Sports enthusiast* might make the disabled feel left out. *Master bedroom* creates images of slavery. *Walk-in closet* could offend people who can't walk.

Author Stan Gaede [pronounced Gay-dee], in his book *When Tolerance Is No Virtue*, says that “the overt goal of PC . . . is to enforce a uniform standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background or sexual orientation. The problem is that the items on this list . . . are not precisely parallel to each other. Though each is the basis for discrimination in our society, they involve very different kinds of issues. So the question immediately becomes: What does it mean to be tolerant *in each case*? . . . PC allows each

group to define tolerance for itself.”

We have now come full circle. The relativism which purportedly undergirds the new tolerance gives way to exactly what it was trying to be rid of, namely, absolutes. That is, the reformers make their own ideals the new guidelines for society. We are all expected to abide by them. These are the new absolutes.

How should Christians respond to all this? Next, we’ll look at how the new absolutes are promoted, and we’ll think about how we might respond.

Absolutely For the Common Good

It’s a myth that America is a relativistic society. The truth is, Americans are a very moralistic people. What is alarming, however, is how cultural reformers are seeking to establish new absolutes which go against traditional ones. Watkins shows how these reformers are setting up new rules we all must follow.

How shall we understand the contradiction between claims of relativism on the one hand, and the imposition of new absolutes on the other? Watkins believes the claim to relativism is an attempt “to rationalize . . . misbehavior and disarm . . . critics.” For example, individuals might fall back on relativism to justify sexual activity once held to be deviant. However, the supposed relativist quickly becomes an absolutist when he wants *others* to agree with *him* on a given idea or issue.

But if everything is relative, how are relativists able to convince others of the rightness of their own beliefs? They can’t appeal to a foundation of unchanging realities and objective truths and be consistent with their relativism.

So how do they do it? Calling opponents names, “fundamentalist” is a popular term, or repeating simplistic clichés—“safe, legal abortion” for example—are a couple of

their favorite means. The media play a strong role in this process, especially television. Captivating images, clever writing, strategically placed laugh tracks, and other elements persuasively convey ideas without logical reasoning.

It is crucial that we step back to see what this situation sets us up for. If we are conditioned to be persuaded by sloganeering rather than by rational discourse, we are prepared to be taken in by any smooth talker. All our clamor for rights and for the authority of the individual has the unexpected result of preparing us to lose our freedoms at the hands of charismatic tyrants.

What can we do to turn things around?

First, Watkins believes that reality itself is on our side. The new absolutes go against the way the universe is. Many women who opt for childlessness, for example, find themselves late in life confronting their own maternal instincts. We can point out these facts to those who believe we can do anything we want and get along quite nicely.

Second, we can learn to recognize sloganeering and insist that the cultural reformers use sound reason when promoting their ideals.

Third, we can point to the hypocrisy of so-called relativists. Homosexuals who barge in on church services demanding tolerance for their lifestyle must see how intolerant *they* are. Those who demand freedom of thought and expression cannot reasonably exclude religious beliefs from public discourse.

As strange as it might sound at first, William Watkins calls us to a renewed *intolerance*. He says, "We must violate the new tolerance and become people marked by intolerance. Not an intolerance that unleashes hate upon people, but an intolerance that's unwilling to allow error to masquerade as truth. An intolerance that calls evil *evil* and good *good*."

To reestablish the old absolutes, Watkins calls for the acknowledgment of certain beliefs, such as: all life is precious; relativism is false; the moral law is real; and, religion is essential. A return to these basics will return us to sound public policy-making, to greater civil order, and to moral progress.

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The World of the Apostle Paul

Rick Wade examines different aspects of life in the day of the Apostle Paul: religion, philosophy, the family unit, social morality, and Christians' conflict with the culture.



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

Religion

The purpose of this essay is to take a look at the Greco-Roman world in which the Apostle Paul lived so that we can better comprehend his ministry. Understanding the historical context helps us to gain such a perspective. We'll discuss religion, philosophy, the family unit, and the social morality of the Hellenistic culture with a concluding look at the conflict Christians faced.

Let's begin with the religion of the first century. Two episodes in the book of Acts provide insight into the religious beliefs and practices of that time.

In Acts 19 we read about the trouble Paul's companions got into over His ministry in Ephesus. Craftsmen who made

miniature shrines of Artemis, the local deity, objected to Paul's teaching that "man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26). In Paul's world, religion was an integral part of everyone's life. State-sponsored civic cults were one religious expression participated in by everybody. Historian Everett Ferguson notes that "the most deeply ingrained religious beliefs and practice in both Greece and Rome. . . . were associated with the traditional civic cult."[\(1\)](#) The state both funded and profited by these cults.

Each city had its patron deity. The city of Ephesus honored Artemis, the goddess of nature and of childbirth. The statue of Artemis stood in a magnificent temple, four times as large as the Parthenon in Athens. Deities such as Artemis were honored with festivals, prayers, and sacrifices. Annual festivals included banquets, entertainment, sacrifices, processions, athletic contests, and the performance of mystery rites. Prayers included invocation, praise, and petition with the goal of receiving the favor of the goddess. Sacrifices were offered for praise, thanksgiving, or supplication.

The riot in Ephesus that resulted from Paul's teaching was prompted partly by monetary concerns; the craftsmen were afraid of losing business. But the chant, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" which went on for two hours—by people who didn't even know what the specific problem was—shows that money was not the only issue. The strength of religious devotion to the civic cults was such that Roman emperors saw the advantage of identifying with them instead of fighting them. We'll talk more about that later in this essay.

Ephesus was also a major center of magical activity, another part of the religious practice of the first century. In Acts 19 we read about practitioners of magic or sorcery forsaking their practices and burning their scrolls as they publicly declared their new faith.

The Ephesians' scrolls contained secret words and formulas

which were used to force the gods to do one's bidding. The precise formula was critical. Practitioners sought wealth, healing, or power; they even used magic in an attempt to gain another person's love. Because it was also believed that to know someone's true name was to have power over that person, names and formulas were blended to produce strong magic.

Paul carried his message to a world with a multitude of religious beliefs, and the message he proclaimed showed its power over them. As we look at our culture with its increasingly pluralistic religious spectrum, we must remember that we, too, carry the same gospel with the same power.

Philosophy

When the Apostle Paul visited Athens, he took the message of Christ to the marketplace where a wide variety of people could be encountered. Among those he talked to were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. We read about his encounter with them in Acts 17.

Who were these Epicureans and Stoics? I'd like to give a thumbnail sketch of their ideas about God, man, and the world which will help us understand why Paul what he did.

Stoicism and Epicureanism were philosophies which were developed to free people from the concerns of the present life.

Stoicism was materialistic and pantheistic. That is, Stoics believed that everything was composed of matter. The higher form of matter was of a divine nature, and it pervaded the universe. They called it various things: fire, Zeus, or even God. They believed that this divine "fire," or God, generated the universe and would one day take the universe back into itself through a great conflagration. This cycle of creation and conflagration is repeated eternally.

Stoicism was thus deterministic. Things are the way they are

and can't be changed. To find true happiness, they believed one should understand the course of nature through reason and simply accept things the way they are.

In contrast to the Stoics, Paul taught that God is personal and not a part of this universe. He also taught that there would be a judgment to come, not a giant conflagration leading to another cycle.

Epicureans focused on the individual's happiness, also, but they went in a completely different direction than the Stoics. They believed that the way to happiness was through maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Tranquility was sought through a quiet, contemplative life lived among a community of friends.

Epicureans were materialists, also, but they weren't pantheists. They believed the universe was formed from atoms falling through space which occasionally bumped into each other accidentally, eventually forming the stars and planets and us. When we die, we simply become dissolved into atoms again. Epicureans believed in the gods, but thought they were like men, only of a higher order. The gods resided out in space somewhere, enjoying a life of quiet pleasure like that of the Epicureans. They had nothing to do with men. Apart from participation in sacrifices and religious rituals for aesthetic purposes, Epicureans believed humans needn't worry about the gods.

Against the Epicureans, Paul taught that God *is* involved in the affairs of His creation and created us specifically to search for Him. Of course, Paul's doctrine of a future judgment didn't fit with their thinking either.

As Paul evangelized the Greek world, he sometimes used their terminology and concepts; he even quoted their poets. But he preached a very different message. Maybe we, too, can find common ground with our culture by knowing what people believe and by putting the gospel into terms they understand. Without

modifying the message itself, we must phrase it in a way that it can be understood. If we don't, we'll have a hard time getting people to listen.

The Family Unit

We've given some attention to the religion and philosophy of Paul's day, but what about the social structures of the Greco-Roman world? More specifically, what was the family like in the first century?

By the first century A.D., marriage was mostly by mutual consent. Historian Everett Ferguson describes marriage this way: "Consent to live together constituted marriage in all societies, and the procreation of children was its explicit object. Marriages were registered in order to make the children legitimate." [\(2\)](#) Although marriages were mostly monogamous, adultery was common. Divorce required only oral or written notice.

Men had the dominant role in the family. They had absolute authority over their children and slaves. Wives remained under their fathers' authority. Men occupied their time with business interests and such social outlets as banquets, and the gymnasias which included exercise facilities, pools, and lecture halls. These functioned as community centers.

In the husband's absence the wife might conduct his business for him. However, managing the home was the wife's primary responsibility. Ferguson quotes the Greek writer Apollodorus who said, "We have courtesans for pleasure, handmaidens for the day-to-day care of the body, wives to bear legitimate children and to be a trusted guardian of things in the home." [\(3\)](#)

Women weren't necessarily confined to the home, however. Some engaged in occupations as diverse as music, medicine, and commerce. Many held civic office, and some held leadership

positions in the religious cults.

Children were not considered a part of the family until acknowledged by the father. They could be sold or exposed if not wanted.

Parents were on their own to find suitable education for their children. Girls could go to the elementary schools, but that was rare. They mostly learned household skills at home. Although most boys learned a trade at home or through an apprenticeship, they could go through a series of primary, secondary, and advanced schooling depending on their class status. Rote memorization was a key element in primary education. Rhetoric was the most important subject in advanced education.

Slaves were a part of the family unit in the Roman Empire. They might be obtained through a number of means including war, child exposure, and the sale of persons to pay debts. Slaves might work in the mines, in temples, in homes as teachers, or in industry; they even held high positions as administrators in civil bureaucracy. Slaves often earned enough money to buy their own freedom, although they had to continue working for their former owners.

Into this society the apostles brought new ideas about the value of the individual and about family relationships. Husbands were to be faithful to their own wives and to love them as their own bodies. Children were to be seen as much more than economic assets or liabilities. Masters were told to treat slaves with justice and fairness. People today who revile Christianity as being "oppressive" probably have no idea how much it elevated people in the Hellenistic world.

Social Morality

Moral instruction in the Hellenistic world was found more in philosophy and custom than in religion. Religion was largely

external; that is, it was a matter of ritual more than of inner transformation. Philosophy sought to teach people how to live. Philosophers gave much attention to such matters as virtue, friendship, and civic responsibility.[\(4\)](#)

Historian Everett Ferguson notes that evidence from the Greco-Roman era indicates that many people lived quite virtuous lives. Inscriptions on grave stones, for example, include praises for husbands and wives for kindness and faithfulness.[\(5\)](#)

In spite of all this, history reveals a morally debased culture in the first century. One example is sexual immorality. "The numerous words in the Greek language for sexual relations," says Ferguson, "suggest a preoccupation with this aspect of life."[\(6\)](#) As I noted earlier, adultery was common. Men often had courtesans for physical pleasure. Homosexuality between young men or between an older and a younger man was openly accepted. Temple prostitution was part of some religious cults.

A low estimate of human worth was exhibited in the Hellenistic world. Earlier I mentioned child exposure as a way of getting rid of children. Unwanted babies—more often girls—were put on the garbage pile or left in some isolated area to die. They might be picked up to be used, to be sold as slaves, or to serve as prostitutes.

The brutality of the day was seen most clearly in the games in the Roman amphitheaters. Ferguson notes that, "The amphitheaters of the west testify to the lust for blood under the empire. The spectacles of gladiatorial combat—man against man, man against animal, and animal against animal—drew huge crowds and replaced Greek drama and athletics in popularity."[\(7\)](#) Executions were considered less exciting than mortal combat. Consequently, when executions were included in the day's program, they were typically carried out during the lunch break. One of the ways criminals were disposed of was by

dressing them in animal skins and throwing them to wild animals.

Such brutality was extended to the Christians in the days of persecutions. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* records that Nero had Christians thrown to the wild animals. He also had them dipped in wax, mounted on trees, and burned like giant torches in his gardens. [\(8\)](#)

Into this world of immorality and brutality came the message of love and righteousness found in Jesus. As with Judaism before, Christianity put religion and morality together. It revealed God's standard of goodness and the sacrificial love of Christ, and it provided the power to attain that standard through the regenerating work of the Spirit based on Christ's work on the cross.

Today, ethics and religion are again separate. And the results are being seen. But as in the first century, Christians today have a message of grace for our society: God not only tells us what *is* good, He also enables us to *be* good.

Christians' Conflict with the Culture

In the early church, the character of Christians was very important for gaining a hearing and for winning converts as they boldly gave testimony of their new faith.

What were these Christians like? The writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written probably in the early second century, said this about them: "They marry as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all." [\(9\)](#)

If their lives were of such an exemplary nature, what was it

that got Christians into so much trouble? Two of the most important factors were their unwillingness to participate in religious rituals and their refusal to bow before the images of the emperors.

Earlier I mentioned the importance of the civic religious cults in the Hellenistic world. The people believed that the gods required their sacrifices and other observances; otherwise, they would be angry and take their wrath out on the people as a whole. For the Christians to refuse to participate was to risk angering the gods.

The other factor was the matter of emperor worship. When Rome conquered the Western world, the rulers saw how important religion was to the people. Rather than fight against this, they took advantage of it by putting images of the Roman emperors in places of worship with the other deities. This wasn't a big problem for the Greeks. Apart from the fact that the Romans were their rulers, Greeks weren't exclusive in their worship. To worship one deity didn't preclude worshiping others as well.

For the Christians, however, Jesus was *Lord*; there could be no other gods besides Him, and they couldn't bow before anyone who claimed divine authority, including the emperor. However, since in the minds of the Romans the emperor represented the state, to refuse to bow before his image was to be an enemy of the state.

Thus, because of their refusal to participate in these activities, Christians were called atheists and enemies of the state. Their behavior was baffling to their neighbors. Why couldn't they just go through the motions? As I already noted, religion was non-exclusive. The people didn't necessarily *believe* in the gods to whom they made sacrifice, anyway. And since there was little or no connection between religion and ethics, one's religious activities didn't normally affect one's moral life. So, why couldn't the Christians just play

along? The reason they couldn't was that to bow before the emperors or the gods would be to commit idolatry which was *the* fundamental sin in the early church.

Christians in the early church had to decide where they could conform to their society and where they couldn't. There was a difference of opinion as to what was appropriate and what wasn't. But it was clear that anyone who would be identified as a Christian had to draw the line here: Jesus is Lord, and there is no other.

Notes

1. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 188.
2. Ibid., 68.
3. Ibid., 70-71.
4. Ibid., 303.
5. Ibid., 64.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, (Old Tappen, New Jersey: Spire Books, 1968), 13.
9. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 136.

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Is Being Touched by an Angel Enough?

Don Closson evaluates what's good about TV's "Touched by an Angel" and identifies areas where it lacks substance from a

biblical perspective.

Society's Interest in Spirituality

During a recent television ratings week, a relatively new program, "Touched by an Angel" ranked third with a 16.6 Nielsen rating. That means more than 16 million households were tuned in to watch three angels communicate God's love and offer of eternal life to people in various difficult, real life situations. Also, *TV Guide* magazine has featured a special report called "God and Television" which includes an article by Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography* and quotes popular writers James Redfield, author of *The Celestine Prophecy*, Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Jack Canfield, coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and others.[\(1\)](#) One might conclude that TV has suddenly found God, and to a degree, that conclusion is right.

TV producers are finding out that typical TV watchers are hungry for programming that includes spiritual themes. In *TV Guide's* own survey, they discovered in a national telephone poll that 56% of adults feel that religion does not get enough attention on prime-time TV; only 8% feel that it gets too much. Of those responding 61% desired more references to God, church attendance, and other religious observances; 68% were eager to see more spirituality as long as it was not tied to organized religion, and 82% wanted more emphasis on moral issues. One of the most successful programs at attracting these viewers has been "Touched by an Angel."

Although it had a rough beginning and was almost canceled, the program has made a miraculous recovery subsequent to hiring a professing Christian as executive producer and changing the focus of the program to more mature topics. The stories center around the activities of three angels played by Della Reese, Roma Downey, and John Dye. In the words of the *TV Guide* article, "Never has prime-time network entertainment presented God in such an unabashed and earnest fashion."[\(2\)](#) Recent

programs have dealt with death in a sophisticated manner, relating how the angels help humans come to grip with both our mortality and the existence of a loving God. Significant topics such as the nature of God, works, eternal destiny, and faith itself have entered into the dialogue. In the words of executive producer Martha Williamson, “our show is God’s truth,” which is that, “God exists. God loves us. God wants to be part of our lives,” and, Della Reese adds, “. . . he has a plan.” [\(3\)](#)

Recently, the three actors and their producer were on the Oprah Winfrey show where they remarked about the popularity of the “Touched by an Angel” program. The actors have received thousands of letters relating how the program has changed viewers’ lives by making a spiritual reality more plausible and by focusing on the love of God. The actors are very proud of how they are portraying God. In the words of John Dye, who plays the angel of death, “If we’re doing it poorly, I just don’t think God would bless the show and allow it to continue.” [\(4\)](#)

Are we experiencing a cease-fire in the culture war? Is the Christian right winning the battle for the media? Some might argue that only the most cynical observer could find something wrong with programs that promote a loving, personal God who wants a relationship with us and is concerned about our salvation. But, now let’s consider what is good and not so good about programs like “Touched by an Angel.”

Audience Response

This development new TV programs that are using God-talk during prime-time hours and getting good ratings for it is a new phenomenon. “Promised Land,” “Seventh Heaven,” and especially “Touched by an Angel” are boldly going where no producer would have previously gone in the spiritual realm. With four new shows about angels, spirits, and ministers lined up for the next season, it might be suggested that TV is

changing for the better. Maybe the networks are finally listening to the public's demand for programming that is more family oriented and morally uplifting.

In fact, I believe that they are. And although not perfect, the new programs are providing a positive service to the viewing community. Let me explain why. Christians have been decrying for years what Richard John Neuhaus called the "naked public square" in a book by the same name.[\(5\)](#) We have lamented the fact that public institutions such as government, education, and the media, rarely leave room for a spiritual reality. Naturalism, as a worldview, has had a monopoly. Christianity, if referred to, was ridiculed and parodied—what I like to call the "Frank Burns" form of Christianity. Frank Burns, the character from "M.A.S.H.," was hypocritical, emotionally weak, and possibly dangerous when given any real authority.

Current programming like "Touched by an Angel" offers a competing worldview to naturalism. It lends plausibility to the notion that there is a loving, personal God. Although the angels seem to struggle somewhat with their own understanding of God's will, they are performing, in a general sense, the most prominent role of angels in Scripture, that of being a messenger from God.

The audience also gets a reasonable picture of what life might be like if a spiritual reality is taken seriously. Contrary to the prevailing naturalistic hopelessness that pervades much of our culture, "Touched by an Angel" does offer hope via a relationship with the Creator of the universe. Characters in the episodes are encouraged to seek God and to have a relationship with Him. And importantly, they are told that they will not earn salvation by following a set of rules. People in the show are generally treated as complex individuals with weaknesses and strengths, and they respond to life's tragedies in a fairly realistic manner. All of this contributes to a positive influence that the other networks

should be encouraged to emulate. As Christians we are quick to condemn, but slow to admit when something positive occurs. This type of programming, which in many ways reminds me of how God would have been expressed or talked about on TV in the late 50s or early 60s, is a bright spot amid new shows like “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” or “Pacific Palisades.”

But while the program does promote belief in God and the legitimate place that faith should play in one’s daily affairs, it falls short in a number of significant ways from being all that Christians would like to see in a bold presentation of biblical truth. Its most glaring omission is the “J” word, as in Jesus Christ. Also, God is seen as loving and caring, but little is said about His other attributes such as being holy and righteous. “Touched by an Angel” might be a useful springboard from which to present the biblical plan of salvation, but its message is too shallow to be depended upon to evangelize the viewing public on its own.

Let’s turn now to take a closer look at the ways in which “Touched by an Angel” might be a handicap to saving faith for its many fans.

The Nature of God and the Nature of Man

In our look at the return of God to prime-time TV programming, particularly the “Touched by an Angel” show, we have thus far considered the positive aspects of the show; now we will focus on how it might be improved.

Granting that “Touched by an Angel” points to a personal God, encourages a personal relationship with that God, and even teaches that our good works are not enough to establish that relationship, it still falls short of teaching a specifically Christian message because of one glaring omission. It never offers a means for that personal relationship. In theological terms, the program never tells us how we are to be found righteous before a holy God. The Bible teaches a concept known

as justification which explains how God, being perfectly holy can declare us righteous enough to enter His presence. The angels on TV assume that God will accept us on our own merit, that simply turning to Him will bridge whatever separation exists. This lack of clarity could be the result of a number of reasons. The writers may feel that there is no need for justification either because God isn't Holy or humankind isn't sinful or fallen in the biblical sense. Both of these ideas are popular today. While people may accept the biblical teaching that God is love, they often ignore the equally important truth that God is just and holy. Most portrayals of human nature identify lack of education as the source of our problems, not a sinful nature.

If God is loving, but not righteous, then the Apostle Paul is in great error when he says in Romans 2:5 that “. . . because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” And concerning human nature he adds that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). This great chasm between man and God is an organic part of the Christian gospel and is missing in much of TV's current focus on spirituality.

On what basis can people have fellowship with a holy God? If you argue that God is merely a projection of human attributes, He is neither holy nor a real spiritual being. If all of us are God, as New Age pantheists often teach, all we need to do is realize our godness via meditation. However, since Jesus walked on the earth, He has been the hope of many in their quest to close the gap between man and God. But again, there have been many different ideas about what Jesus' life accomplished. Some see His life as an example to be copied. Others accept Paul's teaching in Romans 3 that Jesus provides a righteousness from God, apart from living according to the Jewish law, through his death on the cross. But again, there is confusion about who Jesus is. Mormons teach that Jesus was

a pre-mortal, as we were at one time, and that everyone can become gods like He is now. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of Adam, but that Jesus was an angel who lived a sinless life in the form of humanity. They also insist that good works are necessary to please Jehovah.

These different views cannot all be true. For all the good that shows like "Touched by an Angel" might accomplish, they allow for all of the above views to be seen as equally valid. When asked in an interview which God they are representing on the show (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), Della Reese responded by saying that they talk about a Supreme Being, not about religion. But one has to ask, Which Supreme Being? We will examine this question next.

Sin and Salvation

We turn now to determine which Supreme Being, which God is being referred to by these programs. When "Touched by an Angel" actress Della Reese argues that her program refers to a Supreme Being, not to a religion, just what does she mean? Della Reese, whose TV character Tess was chosen in a TV Guide survey as the person most parents would like for their children's Sunday school teacher, is the pastor of a metaphysical congregation on the West side of Los Angeles and participates in the "New Thought Movement." The New Thought movement describes itself as "creedless" and "celebrates individual freedom," but not freedom from acting ethically. Cult leader Barbara Marx Hubbard and author Marianne Williamson of the Course in Miracles fame recently attended a conference with Ms. Reese, the 81st annual meeting of the International New Thought Alliance.[\(6\)](#) All of this is mentioned not to condemn Ms. Reese or to deny her the right to support the New Thought movement, but merely to observe that she is anything but a neutral portrayer of God's nature and activities.

To claim that one can speak the truth about God, and do so from a creedless perspective is a bit disingenuous. Anyone who claims knowledge about God must also tell us how they came by this knowledge. If they reject revelation, or the Christian creed that results from the Bible, where do they receive their information from and why should we accept it? Has God spoken to them personally? Are they accepting revelation from another source? How do they know what they proclaim to know about God? They must also tell us why their approach to having a relationship with God is the right one. Even if they hold to the view that all paths lead to God, or all religious perspectives are valid ones, we must ask why they believe this is true and why it is an appropriate way to think about God and salvation.

All that having been said, Christians can use "Touched by an Angel" as a beginning point in talking about God and salvation from a Christian perspective. But the Christian will begin with the message that humanity is fallen and in need of atonement and justification. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry John the Baptist said of Him "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). This brief sentence is filled with profound implications. First is the notion of sacrifice. Jesus is both the victim and priest, both the sacrificial lamb and the high priest who offers the sacrifice. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the necessity of blood sacrifice as payment for sin. Christ's sacrifice was the once-for-all payment for sin against a Holy God. Paul says that we are now justified by Jesus' blood and that He has reconciled to Himself all things, making peace by the blood of His cross (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 2:13). Jesus' death was an act of propitiation; in other words, it removed God's wrath against sinful humans; it appeased His anger. It was also a substitutionary death; He died on our behalf and in doing so bore our sins on Himself.

It is these truths of Scripture that the new TV programs leave

out by not mentioning the “J” word. Without Jesus in the picture, being “Touched by an Angel” leaves us as sinners before an angry God.

The Gospel and the Great Commission

Finally we will consider whether or not programs like “Touched by an Angel” can be used to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reveals in a concise way what the Christian gospel is and its significance to believers. He writes, “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.” Paul is serious about what is and is not the gospel. Paul continues by teaching that the gospel is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.” Paul then notes that Christ appeared to Peter, the Twelve disciples, five hundred believers, James, then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself. To Paul, belief in the atoning death of Christ and His resurrection is necessary for salvation.

What Paul claims to be the gospel of Christianity is entirely missing from today’s spiritually enlightened programming. As good as programs like “Touched by an Angel” are compared to the rest of TV’s weekly fare, they fall far short of giving viewers what they need to know to experience a relationship with God. The God of these programs is enigmatic, we know that He exists, but how we can experience His love and forgiveness is a bit obscure.

But we should be neither surprised nor angry about this situation. Instead, these programs offer great stepping stones to serious discussions about spirituality and the Christian gospel. Evangelism depends upon the common ground that we

humans all share, including questions about God, fear of death and suffering, alienation, and other topics that are highlighted by these programs. In order to take advantage of these stepping stones, believers must get beyond the temptation to see Christianity as just another personal enrichment program or self-esteem therapy.

Fallen human beings are unable to satisfy God's judgment and wrath against sin. In this sense we are totally depraved. We are not as bad as we could be that would be absolute depravity but we are completely unable to please God via our good works. As Isaiah wrote, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6). Paul, writing to the Church at Ephesus, states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). If it were not for God's imputing, or attributing, Christ's righteousness to us when we placed our faith in His sacrificial death on the cross, we would have no hope for eternal fellowship with God regardless of how many angels we have been touched by.

Network TV should be applauded for recognizing and responding to the public's desire for programs that deal with important moral and spiritual themes. However, Christians cannot become complacent or believe that TV will now bring about the Great Commission. As always, that job is to be accomplished by spirit-filled ambassadors for Christ who teach the gospel as revealed by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Notes

1. *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, pp. 24-45.
2. "Angels & Insight," *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

4. Ibid., p. 55

5. Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

6. Larry Poland, *The Mediator* (Redlands, Calif.: Mastermedia International), vol. 12, no. 1, 1997.

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The Bible Code

Written by Richard Milne

How should thinking Christians respond to purported information embedded in the Bible's original language? There is more to "The Bible Code" than meets the eye.

What Is a Bible Code?

There is no way to ignore the clear fact that a computerized code in the Bible . . . accurately predicted the Gulf War, the collision of a comet with Jupiter, and the assassination of [Israeli Prime Minister] Rabin, also seems to state that the Apocalypse starts now, that within a decade, we may face the real Armageddon, a nuclear World War.[\(1\)](#)

So ends Michael Drosnin's best-seller *The Bible Code*. On the *New York Times* bestseller list for months, the book has created a small industry of people selling books about secret codes, and a huge audience of people reading about and discussing codes. And what are these "codes" that are so fascinating and how does the Bible fit into all of this? Those are just a few of the questions we will address in this essay as we try to reach some balanced conclusions about a very

controversial topic.

People have written codes since at least 400 B.C., and Jewish scholars have looked for codes in the text of the Old Testament for approximately a thousand years. *Gematria*, the discipline of changing portions of text into numbers to look for a deeper meaning, has been part of Jewish Cabalistic tradition since at least the 13th century. But it is only in the last twenty years that computers have extended the range of text searches to almost unimaginable lengths.

At the heart of the current controversy is a scientific paper by three Israeli mathematicians with the helpful title of: "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis." A quite technical paper, it was published in *Statistical Science* in 1994.[\(2\)](#) As is typical in scientific publications, it was peer reviewed. In fact, three other qualified statisticians read the paper, and while confounded by the results, each agreed that the mathematics and data used seemed legitimate. So what did Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg write that has caused so much excitement?

In the 1980s Eliyahu Rips, an Orthodox Jew and well-known Israeli mathematician, came across the writings of Rabbi Michael Weismandel. The book is so rare that Rips found only one copy, at the National Library in Israel. Rabbi Weismandel discovered that by starting with the first Hebrew letter "T" in the book of Genesis and counting forward 49 letters to find an "O" as the 50th letter, and then another 49 letters to an "R," another 49 letters to an "A," and finally another 49 letters to an "H," the word TORAH was spelled out. "Torah" is the Hebrew name for the books Moses wrote. This same pattern happens in the book of Exodus. But in Numbers and Deuteronomy one must count backwards beginning at either the first or fifth verse. But why 50?[\(3\)](#)

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, most numbers are symbolic. For example, 50 is the year of Jubilee, the year that all land

goes back to its original owner, when all debts are canceled, when the land rests for the whole year. It is also said that there are fifty gates of wisdom in the Torah.

Rabbi Weismandel is reputed to have found many patterns like this in the Torah as he laboriously counted by hand again and again in the most holy of all Jewish books. Rips was fascinated by these patterns and wondered what a computer could do to find more patterns.

Now, let's see what Eli Rips discovered as he looked at the text with a computer.

Bible Codes Are Demonstrated by Mathematics and Computers

Michael Drosnin's book, *The Bible Code*, describes the discovery by Eli Rips and others, of messages they claim are coded into the text of the Hebrew Old Testament, and only discoverable in our own time by using computers. These codes warn of dire events in the near future that could affect the whole world. But how are these messages hidden in a book that has been read for more than 2,000 years?

What Rips uncovered was that if he used Rabbi Weismandel's idea of counting off equal intervals between letters, he could find many words in the Hebrew text. The technical name for this method is quite a mouthful: Equidistant Letter Sequences, or ELS. A computer program finds the first letter of a word, and then begins counting until it finds the next letter of the word. This becomes the "skip code." Then, using that skip code, it counts to see if the third letter of the word is found at that same interval. So it would start by skipping every other letter, then every two letters, then every three letters until it finds a "skip" that spells out the word. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, "Torah," is spelled out with an ELS of 50 in the book of Genesis.

This might be the answer to an interesting trivia question, but why is *The Bible Code* selling thousands of copies? That's because Michael Drosnin has made some astounding claims about the ELS codes: that one code anticipated, weeks in advance, the exact day the Gulf War would start; that another code predicted Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by a man named Amir; that a code anticipated, within two years of the actual events, earthquakes in Japan; and that in the year 2000 or 2006 an atomic holocaust, beginning in Israel, is likely. This is great millennial material!

Drosnin's book is based on a paper published in *Statistical Science* in 1994 by Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. With great statistical rigor, the authors show that the 78,064 Hebrew letters of the Book of Genesis, when set out with no spaces or punctuation, can be searched by a computer for specific words spelled out by ELS codes. Specifically, they set out to see if they could find the names of 32 famous rabbis in Genesis. Not only did they find ELS codes that spelled out all 32 rabbis, but near their names were coded their birth dates or death dates, or sometimes both. How could any author have known these details 2000 years before these men lived?

This is amazing enough. The odds are said to be one in ten million! But in his book, Drosnin claims the same kind of codes revealed that Prime Minister Rabin would be assassinated a year before it happened. Drosnin even got a letter delivered through a friend to Rabin, but it was ignored. He also shows dozens of other historic events and how details about them are encoded all around where an ELS code finds the main name or event.

As you might guess, the response to the book has been mixed—to say the least. Most people say, "How could a three-thousand-year-old book possibly say anything about the future?" Others see this as proof that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God. And some are just interested but very skeptical.

Next, we'll look at the reaction to *The Bible Code* and why some are so critical.

Critical Reactions to the Bible Codes

A book making claims to "foretell" the future is almost certain to become a target for both eager followers and cynical scholars. In particular, a rift has developed between the original writers of the mathematical paper, and how Drosnin has used their work.

Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, while maintaining the accuracy of their original paper, say that Drosnin's attempts to state what may happen in the future are "futile," and that Drosnin's book "employs no scientific methodology." [\(4\)](#) Witztum categorically states "predicting the future is impossible." Seems like a strange statement from a man who claims in his own paper that the ELS codes found the names, birth dates, death dates, and cities of residence of 32 rabbis thousands of years before any of them had been born. What the original authors of the *Statistical Science* paper claim is that the ELS codes they have discovered can only give information about what one has a place or name for already. In this view, codes can tell us about death camps in Germany because we know what to look for. Witztum uses this to demonstrate ELS codes at work.

What can we find out about Auschwitz? First, we must have mathematical tools to measure whether a specific ELS and the words found near it are statistically significant. This is provided by the calculations laid out in the 1994 paper, *Statistical Science*. Then one must have a prepared list of words one is looking for.

So, Witztum begins with the words "of Auschwitz" and a list of all of the subcamps of this World War II death camp. Once an ELS for Auschwitz is found, Witztum claims, "We find something very unexpected that [the names of all the subcamps]

consistently appear in the area of the words 'of Auschwitz.'" This, he says, is all that Bible codes can do. Codes cannot predict the future. [\(5\)](#)

But when Genesis was written, all 32 rabbis found in Genesis were still far in the future. The earliest rabbi found lived in the eighth century A.D. This is nearly 2,000 years after Moses. Isn't that predicting the future, at least from the author's point of view?

Michael Drosnin himself has been ambivalent about what the codes tell us. His book says, "I found the Bible code's *prediction* of [Rabin's] assassination myself. . . . When he was killed, as *predicted*, where *predicted*, my first thought was, 'Oh my God, it's real'" [\(6\)](#) (emphasis mine). But in a CNN interview he said, "I don't think the code makes predictions. I think it might tell us about possible futures." [\(7\)](#) Either Drosnin has changed his mind, or he is disingenuous in his book.

Harold Gans, a retired senior mathematician for the U.S. Department of Defense, and an expert at making and breaking codes, was one of the first mathematicians to look at the Bible codes. Highly skeptical at first, he duplicated their experiment, finding the same information. Still suspicious, Gans made up his own test: find the rabbis' cities of birth and death. Again the information appeared in close connection with their ELS codes. His conclusion: "The information was deliberately placed in the Bible by its author. . . . Logic would dictate that the author could not be human, could not be bound by the limits of time. It would be natural to conclude that the author is a divine being." [\(8\)](#)

Is there finally "proof" that the Bible was written by a divine being? That is our next subject.

Do the Bible Codes Prove Divine Inspiration?

Have codes hidden in the Bible finally proved it to be written by God? As we stated earlier, mathematician and code expert Harold Gans thinks so. What about *The Bible Code's*, Michael Drosnin? His own response is quite remarkable: "Everyone I met with seemed to assume that if the code was real, it must be from God. I did not. I could easily believe that it was from someone good, who wanted to save us, but was not our Creator. Clearly it was not someone omnipotent, or he would simply prevent the danger, instead of encoding a warning."[\(9\)](#)

On the other hand, a Jewish group called Aish HeTorah has developed a Discovery Seminar that has been given to nearly 70,000 people in the last ten years. To help attendees develop an "appreciation of the relevance and value of Torah and Judaism in their lives," roughly 20% of the Discovery Seminar features the work of Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. Harold Gans, the Defense Department code specialist mentioned earlier, is an advisor for this group, so compelling has this evidence become for him.[\(10\)](#)

Christians, too, have started looking for ELS codes, claiming to find the Hebrew for Jesus in all sorts of interesting passages about the coming Messiah. Two books by Christians are already out, and surely more will follow. So is this finally "the most important evidence that proves to this generation that the Bible is truly inspired by God"[\(11\)](#) as one Christian writer says?

Brendan McKay is a man with a sense of humor. He also has a mission: to show that even the mathematical uses of ELS codes prove nothing. McKay is an Australian mathematician who has published the first statistical critique of the WRR paper. But at his Web site he has accumulated a most interesting series of what he calls "pictures," much like the diagrams Drosnin

published in *The Bible Code*. In these “pictures” he does exactly what Drosnin does: he looks for a word by ELS codes, and then sees what other words occur nearby. He has also taken up Drosnin’s challenge in *Newsweek* magazine: “When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in *Moby Dick*, I’ll believe them.” [\(12\)](#)

Undoubtedly Drosnin felt he had nothing to fear: hadn’t Rips and his colleagues tried to find information in the Hebrew version of *War and Peace* and found nothing? But published on McKay’s web page are the diagrams from *Moby Dick* of predictions of the death of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, Lebanese President Moawad, Marxist Leon Trotsky, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and even Princess Diana. For Lady Diana, not only is her boyfriend Dodi spelled out across her name, but even the name of their chauffeur, Henri Paul is there! And more are added regularly. But by far the most ironic “discovery” concerns the death of Drosnin himself. The place, method, and motive for his death are all spelled out. [\(13\)](#)

McKay’s technical paper claims to duplicate the WRR paper but finds the 32 rabbis encoded in the Hebrew of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. [\(14\)](#) McKay and his co-author use the same statistical methods, and have Jewish authorities to back their spellings for the rabbis names, just as WRR had. So what does this tell us? At this point, no one knows for certain.

Finally, let’s consider how Christians might want to think about this whole controversy.

How Should Christians Respond to the Bible Codes?

How should thinking Christians respond to these seemingly incredible findings of future events foretold in the Bible, but hidden in codes only a computer can find? Undoubtedly, it is too early to say very much, as even the specific methods

and mathematical checks have yet to be agreed upon. But certain things appear to be clear.

We know very little about how sequences of letters behave when not written by an author, but rather put together by a program within a computer. Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg make certain assumptions about what would and would not be a significantly close connection between two sets of words to rule out random placement. But these are, in the end, arbitrary. What McKay and Dror Bar-Natan have done in their own paper, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*," is demonstrate to their satisfaction that whatever phenomena occurs in the Hebrew text of Genesis can also be found in the Hebrew text of *War and Peace*.[\(15\)](#)

The scholarly arguing about method and mathematics is still going on, but what seems to be emerging is the fact that almost any "message" can be found if a sufficiently long text is used. If this is true, then we have learned something new about how humans who can program computers can find non-random messages in random texts, but we have not shown that a divine intelligence wrote the Bible.

An important question to ask ourselves is, "Why are we so fascinated by codes and mysterious messages in a book as clear as the Bible?" Do we not trust that God has given us all we need to know, both for ourselves and to evangelize the world, in the text that all of us can read? Perhaps for His own pleasure, God has indeed hidden certain things in the text of the Bible, but surely they are not the main message. God has given us the Bible so that we might know Him and make Him known. ELS codes in the Bible do not seem to do much more than pique curiosity.

Our responsibility is to read the text for what it says, not for what may be hidden under the surface. We know from the Book of Revelation that some great cataclysm is coming, and as it draws nearer, we are warned not to be misled. Jesus vividly

portrayed how obvious His return would be: "Just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." [\(16\)](#) So as you watch the news and the millennium approaches, keep your "[baloney detectors](#)" alert!

Will Bible codes become an important tool in the apologetic toolkit of evangelical Christians? We should be very cautious when we do not use God's Word as He wrote it. Merely studying the Bible codes will not necessarily result in Christian faith. For example, Michael Drosnin, after years of research for his book, *The Bible Code*, was still an atheist: "I had proof there was a code, but not proof there was a God. . . . I don't believe in God. . . . The message of the Bible code is that we can save ourselves." [\(17\)](#) If that is all that Drosnin came to believe after working with these codes for five years, we are probably better off having people read the Bible and encountering the real God through His own words. One needs no codes to read and understand John 3:16.

Notes

1. Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 179.
2. Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis," *Statistical Science*, 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, 429-438.
3. Drosnin, 20-21.
4. <http://www.discoveryseminar.org/cgi-bin/var/aishdisc/witztum.html>
5. Ibid.
6. Drosnin, 14.
7. Interview on CNN web page, "Meet Michael Drosnin the Author, *The Bible Code*."
8. Harold Gans, "Bible Codes," <http://www.discoveryseminar.org/bc.html>
9. Drosnin, 79.
10. Aish HaToreh, "Discovery" web page.

11. Yocov Rembsel, *Yeshua* (Toronto, Ontario: Frontier Research Publications, 1996), vi.
12. *Newsweek*, 9 June 1997.
13. [Http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/moby.html](http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/moby.html)
14. "Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*,"
bdm@cs.anu.edu.au
15. Ibid.
16. Matthew 24:27.
17. Drosnin, 103, 179.

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The Deity of Christ

The belief that Jesus was and is God has always been a non-negotiable for Christianity. Don Closson explains that this belief is based on Jesus' own words as well as the teachings of the early church.



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

I recently received a letter from someone who argues that there is only one God, and that He is called many names and worshiped by many different people who hold to many different faiths. This kind of thinking about God is common today, but its popularity does not reduce the intellectual problems that may accompany it. For instance, does this notion of god include the god of the Aztecs who required child sacrifice? What about the warrior gods of Norse mythology: Odin, Thor, and Loki? How does the Mormon belief that we can all become Gods if we join their organization and conform to their system of good works fit into this theological framework? Even John Hick, an influential religious pluralist, believes that only

some of the world's great religions qualify as having a valid view of God. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are valid, but Satanism and the religions of the Waco, Texas, variety are not. Belief that all religious systems worship one God raises difficult questions when we see how different groups portray God and seek to describe how we are to relate to Him.

The issue becomes even more acute when one religious tradition claims that God took on flesh becoming a man and walked on the earth. The Christian tradition has claimed for almost two thousand years that God did just that. The Gospel of John proclaims that, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John is, of course, talking about Jesus, and this claim presents an interesting challenge for a religious pluralist. If what John and the rest of the New Testament writers claim about Jesus is true, then we literally have God in the flesh walking with and teaching a small band of disciples. If Jesus was God incarnate as He walked the earth, we have a first hand account of what God is like in the biblical record. Truth claims about God that counter those given in the Bible must then be discounted. In other words, if Jesus was God in the flesh during His time on earth, other religious texts or traditions are wrong when they teach about God or about knowing God in ways that contradict the biblical record.

In this essay we will consider the evidence for the deity of Christ. Christianity's truth claims are dependent on this central teaching, and once accepted, this claim reduces greatly the viability of religious pluralism, of treating all religious beliefs as equally true. For if God truly became flesh and spoke directly to His disciples about such things as sin, redemption, a final judgment, false religions and true worship, then we have the God of the universe expressing intolerance towards other religious claims- -specifically

claims that discount the reality of sin and remove the need for redemption or the reality of a final judgment. Some might not agree with God's religious intolerance, but then again, disagreeing with God is what the Bible calls sin.

Rather than begin with a response to attacks on Christ's deity by modern critics like the Jesus Seminar or New Age gnostics, our discussion will begin with Jesus' own self-consciousness, in other words, what did Jesus say and think about himself. From there we will consider the teachings of the Apostles and the early church. My goal is to establish that from its inception, Christianity has taught and believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that this belief was the result of the very words that Jesus spoke concerning His own essence.

Christ's Self-Perception

As we begin to examine evidence that supports the claim that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh or God incarnate, a good starting point is Jesus' own self concept. It must first be admitted that Jesus never defines His place in the Trinity in theological language. However, He made many statements about himself that would be not only inappropriate, but blasphemous if He was not God in the flesh. It is important to remember that Jesus' life was not spent doing theology or thinking and writing about theological issues. Instead, His life was focused on relationships, first with His disciples, and then with the Jewish people. The purpose of these relationships was to engender in these people a belief in Jesus as their savior or Messiah, as their only source of salvation. Jesus told the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of His day, that they would die in their sins if they did not believe that He was who He claimed to be (John 8:24). And to one Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Millard Erickson, in his book *Christian Theology*, does a nice

job of laying out evidence that Jesus considered himself equal in essence with God.(1) Unless He was God, it would have been highly inappropriate for Jesus to say, as He does in Matthew 13:41, that both the angels and the kingdom are His. Elsewhere, angels are called "the angels of God" (Luke 12:8 9; 15:10) and the phrase Kingdom of God is found throughout the Scriptures. But Jesus says, "The Son of man will send **His** angels, and they will gather out of **His** kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers" (Matt. 13:41).

When the paralytic in Mark 2:5 was lowered through the roof by his friends, Jesus' first response was to say that the man's sins were forgiven. The scribes knew the implications of this statement, for only God could forgive sin. Their remarks clearly show that they understood Jesus to be exercising a divine privilege. Jesus had a wonderful opportunity to set the record straight here by denying that He had the authority to do what only God can do. Instead, His response only reinforces His claim to divinity. Jesus says, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, Rise, take up your pallet and walk'?" To confirm His authority to forgive sins, Jesus enabled the man to pick up his pallet and go home.

Two other areas that Jesus claimed authority over was the judging of sin and the observance of the Sabbath. Both were considered God's prerogative by the Jews. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "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." Jesus also claimed authority to change man's relationship to the Sabbath. Honoring the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Jews had been given strict instructions on how to observe it. In the book of Numbers, Moses is told by God to stone to death a man who collects wood on the Sabbath. However, in Matthew 12:8 Jesus says that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

These examples show that Jesus made claims and performed

miracles that reveal a self awareness of His own divinity. In our next section, we will continue in this vein.

Christ's Self-Perception, Part 2

At this point in our discussion we will offer even more examples of Jesus' self knowledge of His essential equality with God.

A number of comments that Jesus made about His relationship with the Father would be unusual if Jesus did not consider himself equal in essence with God. In John 10:30 He says that to see Him is to see the Father. Later in John 14:7-9 He adds that to know Him is to know the Father. Jesus also claimed to have existed prior to His incarnation on earth. In John 8:58 He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Some believe that the words used here by Jesus constitute His strongest claim to deity. According to the *Expositors Bible Commentary* this passage might more literally be translated, "Before Abraham came into being, I continuously existed." The Jews recognized the phrase "I am" as one referring to God because God used it (1) to describe himself when He commissioned Moses to demand the release of His people from Pharaoh (Exodus 3:14), and (2) to identify himself in the theistic proclamations in the second half of Isaiah. Jesus also declares that His work is coterminous with the Father. He proclaims that "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). The Jews hearing Jesus understood the nature of these claims. After His comment about pre-existing Abraham, they immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy because they understood that He had declared himself God.

In Jesus' trial He makes a clear declaration of who He is. The Jews argued before Pilate in John 19:7, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." Matthew 26 records that at Jesus' trial, the

high priest tells Jesus, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus replies, "You have said it yourself, . . . But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." This would have been a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to save himself by clearing up any misconceptions concerning His relationship with the Father. Instead, He places himself in a position of equality and of unique power and authority. Again, the Jews understand what Jesus is saying. The high priest proclaims, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy." He calls for a vote of the council, and they demand His death (Matt. 26:65-66).

Another indicator of how Jesus perceived himself is in His use of Old Testament Scripture and the way He made His own proclamations of truth. In a number of cases, Jesus began a sentence with "You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you. . . ." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). Jesus was giving His words the same authority as the Scriptures. Even the prophets, when speaking for God, would begin their statements with: "The word of the Lord came to me," but Jesus begins with: "I say to you."

There are other indications of how Jesus saw himself. For example, Christ's claim to have authority over life itself in John 5:21 and 11:25, and His use of the self referential "Son of God" title point to unique power and authority and His essential equality with God.

The Apostles' Teaching

We will turn now to look at what Jesus' followers said of Him. The Gospel of John begins with a remarkable declaration of both Christ's deity and full humanity. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." Later in verse fourteen John

remarks that this "Word" became flesh and walked among them and points to Jesus as this "Word" become flesh. What did John mean by this remarkable passage?

The first phrase might literally be translated: "When the beginning began, the Word was already there." In other words, the "Word" co-existed with God and predates time and creation. The second phrase "The Word was with God" indicates both equality and distinction of identity. A more literal translation might be "face to face with God," implying personality and relational coexistence. Some groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, make a great deal of the fact that the word "God" in the third phrase "The Word was God" lacks an article. This, they argue, allows the noun God to be translated as an indefinite noun, perhaps referring to "a God" but not "the" almighty God. Actually, the lack of an article for the noun makes the case for the deity of the "Word" more clearly. The Greek phrase, *theos en ho logos* describes the nature of the "Word," not the nature of God. The article *ho* before the word *logos* shows that the sentence describes the nature of the Word; He is of the same nature and essence as the noun in the predicate; that is, the Word is divine. It is interesting to note that verses 6, 12, 13, and 18 of the same chapter refer unambiguously to God the Father and use an anarthrous noun, i.e., a noun without the article.(2) Yet strangely the Jehovah's Witnesses do not dispute the meaning of these passages.

The author of Hebrews writes plainly of Christ's deity. The first chapter states that, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." The passage also states that Jesus is not an angel nor is He just a priest. In Colossians 1:15 Paul adds that, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things

were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Although Paul clearly attributes godlike qualities to Jesus, the use of the word firstborn often causes confusion. The word can be a reference to priority in time or supremacy in rank. Since Jesus is described as the Creator of all things, the notion of supremacy seems more appropriate. Philippians 2:5-11 also talks of Jesus existing in the form of God. The Greek term used for form is *morphe*, denoting an outward manifestation of an inner essence.

Mention should also be made of the use by New Testament writers of the word *Lord* for Jesus. The same Greek word was used in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, as the translated word for the Hebrew words Yahweh and Adonai, two special names given to God the Father. The Apostles meant to apply the highest sense of this term when referring to Jesus.

The Early Church

Thus far we have been examining the Christian claim of Christ’s divinity, first considering Jesus’ own self-concept and then the thoughts of those who wrote the New Testament. It is not within the scope of this essay to argue that the words attributed to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament are indeed His. Instead, we have argued that the words attributed to Jesus do claim an essential equality with God the Father. The traditional view of the Christian faith has been that God has revealed himself to us as three separate persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who shared a common essence.

Belief in Jesus’ essential equality with God the Father was communicated by the Apostles to the church fathers to whom they handed the task of leading the church. Even though these early leaders often struggled with how to describe the notion of the Trinity with theological accuracy, they knew that their faith was in a person who was both man and God.

Clement of Rome is a good example of this faith. Writing to the church at Corinth Clement implies Jesus' equality with God the Father when he says "Have we not one God, and one Christ and one Spirit of grace poured upon us." Later, in his second letter, Clement tells his readers to "think of Jesus as of God , as the judge of the living and dead." Clement also wrote of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God; in other words, Christ existed before He took on human flesh. Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Christ's nature in his letter to the Ephesians, "There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God." A little later, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 140-202.) had to stress the humanity of Christ because of Gnostic heresy that argued that Jesus was only a divine emanation. Irenaeus wrote, "There is therefore . . . one God the Father, and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who . . . gathered together all things in himself. But in every respect, too, he is man, the formation of God: and thus he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself" (*Against Heresies III*, 16). During the same time period, Tertullian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 155-240) wrote of Christ's nature that "what is born in the flesh is flesh and what is born in the Spirit is spirit. Flesh does not become spirit nor spirit flesh. Evidently they can (both) be in one (person). Of these Jesus is composed, of flesh as man and of spirit as God" (*Against Praxeas*, 14). Later he added, "We see His double state, not intermixed but conjoined in one person, Jesus, God and man" (*Against Praxeas*, 27).

By A.D. 325 the church had begun to systematize Christianity's response to various heretical views of Christ. The Nicene Creed stated, "We believe in God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of

Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being.”(3)

The belief in Jesus Christ being of the same essence as God the Father began with Jesus himself, was taught to His Apostles, who in turn handed down this belief to the early church Fathers and apologists. Christ’s deity is the foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 684-90.
2. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 28-29.
3. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26.

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Worship

Definitions of Worship

During a 1954 interview A.W. Tozer, a great pastor and editor of the *Alliance Witness*, was asked what he thought would awaken the church from its complacency. This was his response: “In my opinion, the great single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with His train filling the

temple. The holy art of worship seems to have passed away like the Shekinah glory from the tabernacle. As a result, we are left to our own devices and forced to make up the lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the attention of the church people.”(1) John MacArthur, a more contemporary preacher and writer, wrote this indictment in 1993: “In the past half decade, some of America’s largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up the Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church.”(2)

These stinging analyses, whether we agree with them or not, remind us that the biblically based Christian is challenged to consider worship, along with all facets of life, in light of the culture in which he or she lives. Worship should be included in the total worldview of each individual Christian. It is a significant part of a believer’s life. With this in mind, we will reflect on the meaning and history of worship, hindrances to worship, and the content of worship. And we will offer our own analyses and suggestions.

As is true with many terms used among Christians, the word “worship” can become a cliché devoid of significant content if we don’t stop to consider its meaning. “Our English word means worthship,’ denoting the worthiness of an individual to receive special honor in accordance with that worth.”(3) The Hebrew and Greek terms found in the Bible “emphasize the act of prostration, the doing of obeisance.”(4) Warren Wiersbe offers a broad definition based upon these concepts. He writes, “Worship is the believer’s response of all that he is—mind, emotions, will, and body—to all that God is and says and does. This response has its mystical side in subjective experience, and its practical side in objective obedience to God’s revealed truth. It is a loving response that is balanced

by the fear of the Lord, and it is a deepening response as the believer comes to know God better.”(5) A more narrow definition may sound like this: “Worship is pure adoration, the lifting up of the redeemed spirit toward God in contemplation of His holy perfection.”(6)

Do these definitions describe worship as you experience it with your gathered church and in your daily life? If so, you are blessed. If not, perhaps you need to evaluate the place of worship in your life. Perhaps you need to consider honestly if you have allowed yourself to become accustomed to traditions that have confused true worship. Perhaps you have approached worship with the idea it applies only on Sunday mornings. Or maybe you have never stopped to consider the importance of worship.

The History of Worship

What comes to mind when you think of worship? Is it a formal occasion? Is it a joyous occasion? Does it contain certain rituals? Are you involved? Are you praising God? Are you learning? Are you hearing from God? Are you in contemplation? Are you singing? Are you praying? Are you alone, or with other people?

Perhaps you can answer some or all of these questions in the affirmative. And you probably can add other elements to what is contained in worship in your experience. But have you ever considered what worship may have looked like when the early church gathered? Were these elements included, or did it look very different? A very brief survey of the history of worship will help us begin to evaluate the purpose and content of worship today. Our ancestors had to wrestle with what worship entails long before our time. We can and should learn from them.

The worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the first Christians. As Robert Webber has written,

"It must be remembered that the early Christians came into worship from a different perspective from modern Christians. We accept the Old because we have been informed by the New. But they accepted the New because they had been informed by the Old."(7) The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Thus Jesus set the stage for the first acts of worship among the early believers by giving new meaning to the ancient ritual of the Passover meal. Acts 2:46 tells us that the earliest form of Christian worship was a meal—"breaking bread in their homes."(8) Believers were remembering the Last Supper just as the Jews remembered the Passover. Eventually churches became too large to accommodate these shared meals, so a single table with the elements of bread and wine became the focus. Thus "the central act of Christian worship in the history of the church has always been the Communion."(9)

By the second century worship began to look more like what most of us include in our churches. Justin Martyr, an apologist and pastor, wrote of two major parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of lessons from the Old and New Testaments, a sermon, prayers, and hymns. The liturgy of the Eucharist included a kiss of peace; offering of bread, wine, and water; prayers and thanksgiving over the bread and wine; remembrance of Christ's death, including the narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, and a command to continue in it; an Amen, said by all the people; Communion; then the reserved portions were taken by the deacons to those who were absent.(10)

It is unfortunate that by the late medieval period this twofold form of worship was overcome by pomp and ceremony that crowded out its meaning. But even the Reformers of the sixteenth century insisted on maintaining both Word and Sacrament. Their intent was to restore both elements to their primitive simplicity, and in the process the Scriptures were to be given an authoritative place.(11) Most evangelicals

attempt to sustain the traditions of the Reformers. But what is the purpose of all this for the gathered church, and the individual believer?

The Purpose of Worship

Why should we worship God? Quite simply, we should worship Him because of who He is—God. In Revelation 4 and 5 we see descriptions that should provide impetus for our worship. He “is the only God, the highest, the Lord God, the heavenly King, the almighty God and Father, the Holy One.”(12) To put it succinctly, “in worship we simply tell God the truth about Himself.”(13) Each day of our lives we tell God the truth about Himself, if we are thinking and living through the grid of a Christian worldview.

I have a good friend who is a physicist. Years ago his job included the consistent use of a sophisticated electron microscope. This impressive device allowed him to take pictures of the microscopic things he was studying. From these pictures he developed a wonderful slide presentation that served to remind us of the order and complexity that exists beyond what we can see with the naked eye. When we viewed these remarkable images, we responded in worship. Why? Because our worldview prompted us to contemplate the One who created such awesome things. We were filled with wonder. In our response we were telling God the truth about Himself. We were worshipping.

After his death friends of the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal, “found stitched into the lining of his doublet a scrap of parchment with a rough drawing of a flaming cross. Around that cross was the following poem,”(14) entitled “Fire”:

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not of the philosophers and the learned.
Certitude. Joy. Certitude. Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world and of all outside of God.

The world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.
Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy.
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated from Thee for ever.(15)

In this unforgettable refrain we hear the heart of a man in worship. Pascal was responding to the very personal presence of God in his life by pouring out his heart. His contemplation led to worship. Jonathan Edwards, the great American philosopher- theologian of the eighteenth century, shared one of his experiences of worship in his *Personal Narrative*, which was published after his death.

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception . . . which continued near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.(16)

The full account of this encounter indicates that Edwards experienced worship during a time of contemplation and prayer. He sought to focus on God, and God responded in a dramatic way, just as was true for Pascal.

Such experiences don't have to be descriptive only of a few. We can apply at least two things from them. First, as with my physicist friend, our lives should include a sense of wonder. And wonder should lead to worship. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye."(17) Second, as with Pascal and Edwards, we need times of contemplation and prayer. Thoughts about God, and prayer to God can lead to a personal encounter with the One we worship.

Some Contemporary Hindrances to Worship

As of July 3, 1997, I will have known my wife for 30 years. During that time my love for her has become enriched through

many experiences. If you were to ask me why I love her, I might respond by telling you what I receive from her. Or I might give you analyses of marriage fit for an essay. I might even attempt to persuade you to believe in marriage as I do. None of these responses would be wrong, but they would be incomplete, and they wouldn't focus on the primary subject: my wife, the object of my love. The lover would have hindered true praise of the loved one.

The same can be said frequently of us as we consider worship in our lives. If we aren't careful, we can hinder worship, both individually and corporately, by emphasizing things that may be good, but don't give us a complete picture of what worship entails. There are at least three words that can describe these hindrances: pragmatism, intellectualism, and evangelism.

Pragmatism as a hindrance to worship. First, pragmatism has led many to find ways of getting what they want, instead of what they need. This means the worship "customer" is sovereign. "The idea is a basic selling principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they don't want." (18) Many churches are growing numerically through such strategies, but is worship taking place? It's my conviction that the answer is "No." People may be coming, but numbers are not the issue. Worship is done among regenerated Christians who are concentrating on who God is, not on what we want. Paradoxically, what we truly want, communion with God, takes place when we pursue what we truly need.

Intellectualism as a hindrance to worship. Second, intellectualism is not a substitute for worship. Coming from one who believes strongly in the importance of intellect in the Christian life, this may be surprising. But I have come to realize that worship is not a glorified Bible study. This does not mean that the preaching of Scripture is not a key ingredient of worship, but the one who is preaching is

responsible to share in light of worship. As Warren Wiersbe has written, "There is much more to preaching than passing along religious information. It must reveal, not mere facts about God, but the Person of God Himself." (19) Wiersbe continues: "When preaching is an act of worship, the outline is to the text what a prism is to a shaft of sunlight: it breaks it up so that its beauty and wonder are clearly seen." (20) Such comments also apply to our private times of Bible study. Our minds are to be used in study, but what is studied includes worship of the One who has communicated with us.

Evangelism as a hindrance to worship. Third, evangelism is not the ultimate reason for worship. Non-believers who are in attendance at a time of worship certainly can be touched by the Spirit, but worship implies the believer's response to God. A non-believer cannot worship the true and living God. Thus an "altar call" should not be the primary focus. Instead, the church should be called to focus on the One who has called them into His family. Then they take what they have heard, seen, and experienced into the surrounding world.

Let's reconsider such hindrances as we seek to worship God, who will be glorified in the process.

The Content of Worship

"I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). "I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Thy wonders. I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High" (Ps. 9:1-2). "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1). "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6).

What do these Scriptures have in common? They are statements of worship; they are inspired statements from men to God. And for the moment it's our hope that they serve to stimulate us to contemplate the content of worship.

One of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship is found in Jesus' well-known encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:23-24). Jesus told her:

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Earlier (vs. 21) Jesus had told the woman that the place of worship was unimportant. One doesn't worship just on a particular mountain, in Jerusalem, or any other place. We are free to worship God anywhere. So then He told her what is important.

First, the spirit of worship is important. We are to render "such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act." (21) Whether we are in a time of private praise and adoration, or gathered with the church in corporate proclamation, we are to respond to who God is from the spirit, from the whole of our innermost being. Second, we are to do "this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in his Word." (22) The concept of responding to God in spirit can give rise to confusing individual expressions if those expressions are not guided by Scripture. There must be balance between spirit and truth. One without the other is not complete. "As some see it, a humble, spiritual attitude means little. According to others, truth or doctrinal soundness is of no

importance. Both are one-sided, unbalanced, and therefore wrong. Genuine worshipers worship in spirit and truth.”(23)

These comments began with quotes from biblical writers who wrote their statements of worship. It’s striking to note how those statements contain not only the truth of God, but the truth about God. Truth permeates their worship. But it’s also striking to note the spirit with which those expressions were shared. They are from the heart. They penetrate our lives; they are alive with true worship. As we read and hear such expressions they should encourage us to worship God in spirit and truth. And thus the content of our worship will be pleasing to Him.

Concluding Suggestions Concerning Corporate Worship Renewal

We have discussed several aspects of worship: its definition, history, purpose, hindrances, and content. To conclude we will focus on five suggestions that can be applied to corporate worship in the contemporary church.

First, consider how time is allotted when the church gathers for worship. As churches grow they tend to break into various times of worship. Thus the available time for worship is decreased. One group needs to be released from the worship center in time for another to enter. As a result, often there is a feeling of being rushed. And this feeling of being rushed is exacerbated because so much of the available time is spent with things that may be good, but are not conducive to worship. Announcements may concern good things, for example, but they take time from the true intent of the gathered church.

Second, consider how much attention is given to worship by the leadership of the church. The pastor, staff, and other leadership should demonstrate that worship has a very high priority. There should not be a question of how much energy

has been given to preparation for worship on the part of the leadership.

Third, consider who is the leader of worship and why. It is my conviction that the pastor should be the one who calls the body to worship and leads it by example. Much is communicated to the congregation when the primary earthly leader implores the people to give their undivided attention to the reason for their gathering. In addition, much is communicated when the pastor is involved in worship beyond just the delivery of a sermon, no matter how good it may be. Having served on a church staff for many years, I know some of the time implications of this suggestion. But I believe if the church makes worship the priority, the pastor should provide the leadership for it. Fourth, consider what has priority in worship. Quite simply, the question is whether or not God has priority. Or do other things tend to crowd the allotted time and distract from the true intention? For example, it may be good to let a visiting relative of a church member sing a solo, but has someone talked with this person in order to discuss the reason for any solos within the time of worship? Remember, worship is to be God- centered, not man-centered.

Fifth, consider the place of style versus substance in worship. It appears to me that the "style" of worship is not the issue as much as the substance. In other words, if the people are called to worship God with integrity and concentration on Him, the style is secondary. This applies regardless of whether the style is liturgical/traditional, contemporary, or something in between. But if the style overshadows substance, true worship may be thwarted. It is a wise church that brings both style and substance together in a manner that pleases God.

These five suggestions and the thoughts that have preceded them have been offered with the hope that you have been stimulated to consider the importance of worship in your life. The worshiping Christian in a worshiping church is a person

who is continually empowered to impact the world for the glory of God. May you be among those empowered people!

Notes

1. A.W. Tozer, *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Zondervan, 1957), 87-88.
2. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway, 1993), xvii-xviii.
3. Everett F. Harrison, "Worship," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker, 1960), 560.
4. Ibid.
5. Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, 1986), 27.
6. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 561.
7. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 84.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 86.
10. Ibid., 80-81.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid.
14. Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993),
15. Blaise Pascal, *Fire*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13.
16. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13-14.
17. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard, 1936), 713.
18. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 49.
19. Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 123.
20. Ibid., 124.