

Christian Cliches

Conversations and Clichés

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

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

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

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

Tom: Hi, Sam!

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

Tom: You mean before the sales meeting?

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

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

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

Tom: Like what?

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

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

Sam: What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible.

And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

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

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

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

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

I Have Jesus in My Heart

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart*. As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through

his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

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

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 "the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing." {2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted "that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God." {3} In addition, we should realize that Paul's favorite

expression revolved around the phrase “in Christ.” This phrase “(or some cognate expression, such as “in the Lord,” “in Him,” etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul.”{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian’s life through the Spirit.

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

I Have Faith

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

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

faith. But just what does this word mean?

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

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

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of “trust *in* a person or thing” (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in

the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already “proven” to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

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

I’m Saved!

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

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When we say *I’m saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. “And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that

Jesus will save, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . .”{7} While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, “For my eyes have seen Thy salvation” (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph’s son was being called God’s salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

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

What Would Jesus Do?

What Would Jesus Do? is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. “The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins,

paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD.”{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

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

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask *What did Jesus do?* in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with “moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22).”{10} More importantly, on the cross “he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind (the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . .”{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus’ disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what

Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples' reaction after hearing Jesus' teaching. He said, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were "amazed" at His words. Jesus continued by stating, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they were "even more astonished" and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" (Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

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

Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.
4. *Ibid.*, 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, "Sin," in *Evangelical Dictionary of*

Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).

9. Albert Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?", *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. Ibid.
12. Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About "WWJD", 6.

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Why We Should Believe in the Trinity

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

How the Doctrine of the Trinity Developed

The doctrine of the Trinity separates orthodox Christian teaching from heresy. This essential teaching of Christianity states that we believe in one God who exists in three separate and distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each member is equal in nature and substance. (For a biblical defense of the Trinity, see [Jehovah's Witnesses and the Trinity](#).)

A common question raised by heretical groups is, When and how did this doctrine develop? According to the Watchtower tract *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* this doctrine was not held

by the church fathers. Rather, it was imposed on the church by the pagan emperors who had “converted” to Christianity at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. The bishops in attendance were overawed by the emperor and signed the creed against their inclination. Let’s take a careful look at what really happened at these two key church councils.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What Did the Church Fathers Say About the Trinity?

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were never a part of the theology of the church fathers. In the article *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* several church fathers are cited as denying the orthodox view of Jesus. They include Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165, Irenaeus A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria A.D. 215, Tertullian A.D. 230, Hippolytus A.D. 235, and Origen who died in A.D. 250. The Watchtower list quotes from each theologian, claiming that they believed the inferiority of the Son to the Father. But the article contains no footnotes citing the source of these quotations.

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

Justin Martyr: “...the Father of the universe has a Son; who

being the logos and First-begotten is also God" (*First Apology* 63:15).

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

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

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

Hippolytus: "And the blessed John in the testimony of his gospel, gives us an account of this economy and acknowledges this word as God, when he says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' If then the Word was with God and was also God, what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one; of two persons however, and of a third economy, the grace of the Holy Ghost" (*Against the Heresy of One Noetus*. 14).

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

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

What Did the Apostle John Say?

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

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

Throughout his Gospel, John demonstrates that Jesus possesses the attributes which qualify Him to be God. Jesus displays power over nature, over disease, and even death. He has a grasp of the Law of God which He, though not formally trained, teaches with such authority as had never been seen before (7:14-16). Testimony from John the Baptist (1:29; 3:26-36) shows His authority to be God. Jesus also accepted the worship of men (9:38).

Jesus also makes several statements revealing His divinity. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." Here, Jesus

commands followers to honor Him as they honor the Father. To do this, one must acknowledge Jesus as being equal in nature to God.

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

In John 10:30 Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." Jesus did not mean "I am one in purpose with God." He was claiming to *be* God. The verses that follow His declaration make that clear: "Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' 'We are not stoning you for any of these,' replied the Jews, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God'" (vv. 31-33). The Jews clearly understood His statement and Jesus does not deny their accusation.

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

John 1:1

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

done. This discussion will get a little technical, but the importance of the subject deserves careful attention.

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

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

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

According to a Greek grammar rule called Colwell's rule, the construction in John 1:1c—anarthrous predicate nominative (*theos*)-equative verb (*ēn*)-articled noun (*ho logos*)—does not automatically mean that the predicate nominative must be indefinite. Colwell's rule, in summary, states that an anarthrous predicate nominative preceding an equative verb can be translated as either (1) definite, (2) qualitative, or (3) indefinite. Thus, (1) as a definite noun *the Word* equals *God*, (2) as a qualitative *the Word* has the attributes and qualities of *God*, or (3) as an indefinite noun *the Word* is a *god*. Context determines which one it will be.

In the vast majority of cases in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, this construction is translated as a

qualitative or definite noun. Greek Scholar Dan Wallace writes, “an anarthrous pre verbal PN [predicate nominative] is normally qualitative, sometimes definite and only rarely indefinite. . . . We believe there may be some in the NT, but this is nevertheless the most poorly attested semantic force for such a construction.”[\[1\]](#)

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

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

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

Alleged Objections from the Gospel of John

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

In some translations like the *King James Version* and *New American Standard*, John 1:14 reads that Jesus is “the only begotten from the Father.” Some cults understand the Greek word translated *only begotten* to mean “to procreate as the Father.”[\[2\]](#) In other words, God created Jesus. However, this

definition would be inconsistent with John 1:1a, 17:5, and 17:24 which declare the eternal nature of the Word.

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

The next controversial verse is John 14:28. Jesus states, “. . . I am going to the Father for the Father is greater than I.” Here the Jehovah’s Witnesses understand the term *greater* to mean “superior in nature.” Thus they assert that Jesus is stating His inferiority to God. Once again, however, this would argue against John’s consistent theme of the deity of Christ. *Greater* here refers to position, not to nature. For example, we would agree with the statement that the President of the United States is greater than you or I. As the chief executive of the country he is greater due to his position. However, we would disagree with a statement that says the President is by nature better than you or I. In other words, is he a superior being to the rest of the citizens of the United States? No, we are all human and equal in nature. *Greater* refers to position, not to nature.

There is an established economy in the Trinity. The Father is the head who sends the Son. The Son sends the Spirit. All three are equal in nature, but different in position. This is

called “functional subordination.” We see the same principle in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “. . . and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” The husband is greater than his wife, her head by position. However, he is not a superior being to his wife. The same applies to Jesus. The Father is greater by position, not by nature.

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

Notes

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

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

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End Time Anxieties

End Time Concerns

This past January, the *Wall Street Journal* published a special edition that at first glance anticipated the arrival of the next millennium. However, on closer inspection it quickly became apparent that this edition was a spoof— the year on the masthead was the year 1000. Still, what was interesting was how similar many stories were to their modern

counterparts—there was even an account of a sex scandal in high political circles. The underlying message from the *Journal* would appear to be that just as the transition to the year 1000 went off without a hitch, so too life will go on as we enter a new millennium.

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

Questions concerning the future are of special relevance to Christians. Contrary to other worldviews that see history as cyclical, the Bible teaches that history as we know it will come to an end with the dramatic return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the Bible has much to say of the end times, Christians have been exposed to a variety of end time scenarios which spell out in exacting detail the chronology of the last days. In this respect, we share much in common with those who faced the transition to the year 1000. The anxiety that many westerners experienced as the year 1000 approached was due in part to a theological concept popularized by the

great Christian thinker, Augustine. According to Augustine, the millennial reign of Christ began at His first coming. Since the book of Revelation teaches of a 1000 year period in which Christ reigns over all the earth, Augustine allegorized this concept by teaching that Christ had bound Satan through His earthly ministry. This made complete sense to Augustine, since it would account for the tremendous growth of the church from a tiny band of first century Jews to the favored religion of the empire in Augustine's day. But when Christ did not return anytime in the 11th century, this interpretation was significantly altered.[\[1\]](#) History triumphed over exegesis.

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

Adventism Old and New

With the approach of the third millennium, there has been a noticeable increase of fervor among many sincere believers that Christ's return should be expected in the near future. As an example of this expectation, consider the success of the *Left Behind* book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This series, detailing the coming rapture of the saints, the horrible tribulation period, and other aspects of biblical eschatology, has sold over 3.5 million copies since 1995.[\[3\]](#) While it is possible that such a work would find a ready audience at any other time, it is probably not coincidental that such success would be attained as the new millennium approaches.

The increased emphasis by many Christians on the probability that the return of Christ is imminent can be attributed to an understanding of prophecy that has become especially popular

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

This change in interpretation came about through an innovative understanding of Scripture developed by John Darby, a 19th century pastor whose disillusionment with the spiritual condition of most Christians led him to conclude that the contemporary church was in apostasy. He therefore developed a philosophy of history, known as dispensationalism, which attempted to demonstrate how God's plan of redemption has unfolded under differing circumstances throughout time. It was Darby's interpretation that as the return of Christ draws near, the corruption and apostasy of the church would be increasingly obvious. It is through dispensationalism that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have been seen as symbolic of different periods of church history.[{5}](#)

Especially significant was Darby's idea that Christ's return would occur in two stages. Initially, Christ would secretly come *for* the saints just prior to the great Tribulation, to separate the true believers from the apostates and the

unbelievers. Then, at the conclusion of the Tribulation period, Christ will come *with* the saints, in power and great glory, to establish His millennial reign.[\[6\]](#) The concept of a pretribulation rapture has become the dominant position among conservative Christians in the U.S., and at one time was a test of orthodoxy for many. However, this was primarily a reaction against liberalism's denial of Christ's personal return. Today, many Christians have agreed to disagree on this issue, as conservative biblical scholars have shown that both the midtribulation rapture and the posttribulation rapture are viable interpretations. While all three positions agree that Christ will personally return, the quandary is *when*. But as we shall see, attempts to determine the timing of Christ's return have invariably ended in failure.

Words of Caution

In January 1999 a cult group from Denver was expelled from Israel after Israeli authorities determined that they had gone to Israel in the hope that their radical activities would actually provoke the second coming of Christ. Their leader had predicted that he was to die on the streets of Jerusalem, only to be resurrected three days later.[\[7\]](#) Of course, Revelation chapter 11 speaks of a similar occurrence when the Beast will kill God's two witnesses in Jerusalem. And although this cult group was certainly not composed of orthodox Christians, it is becoming increasingly evident that even many Christians are attaching special significance to the third millennium for the end times. Is there a biblical basis for doing so? Let's examine that question.

While the church has always looked for the second coming of Christ, it was the dispensational theology of the modern period that seemed to unlock many difficulties associated with prophetic fulfillment. Dispensationalism makes a distinction between Israel and the church, and anticipates the imminent return of Christ after Israel's restoration as a nation.

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

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this is that precise interpretation of biblical prophecy is risky business. Just as those who advocate a hidden code in the Bible only discover "predicted" events after the fact, so too Christians need to demonstrate humility when attempting to interpret apocalyptic images. A key to interpreting the book of Revelation is understanding the purpose of the book. The apostle John was writing to Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wanted Christians to understand that severe persecution could not prevent God's victory over satanic forces. The Revelation was not written to satisfy our curiosity about future events, but to assure believers that God's redemptive program will go forward.

Numerous times throughout church history, sincere people have attempted to discern the details of prophetic Scripture only

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

Signs of the Times?

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

One of the main problems when making predictions of Christ's return has been the emphasis placed on signs of the times. Typically, predictions are based on signs that are assumed to reflect events predicted in Scripture. But when the disciples asked Jesus for the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, Jesus replied in very general terms. He spoke of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, and the preaching of the gospel in all the world. Scholars still debate whether Jesus is speaking of the Tribulation period here, or of the

years leading up to the Tribulation. But it would appear that these signs that Jesus gave are fairly common events throughout church history. Only the proclamation of the gospel in all the world remains to be fulfilled.

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

Also, when we consider the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, we see that their fulfillment is not what many of us would call literal interpretation. For instance, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 that Elijah would return was fulfilled in John the Baptist. In Acts 15:16-18, James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to conclude that the Old Testament prophecy of David's restored tabernacle was fulfilled by the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel. And who would have ever thought that Hosea 11:1, which refers in the original context to God bringing Israel out of their Egyptian captivity, would be applied by Matthew to refer to Jesus' brief sojourn in Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:14-15)?

While this is not to suggest that we shouldn't diligently search the Scriptures for understanding God's plan for history, it is at the same time a reminder that the details of biblical prophecy are often difficult to ascertain. Acts 1:11 is one of many verses that affirms that Jesus Christ will

personally return, but in Acts 1:7 Jesus Himself tells the disciples that instead of focusing on times and dates, they were to focus on the proclamation of the gospel. Those are good words for us today as well.

Our Prophetic Ministry

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

Some teachers today seem to be suggesting that the Y2K computer bug will act as a trigger for a worldwide catastrophe that will signal the end times. While we do not want to suggest that any difficulties predicted for the Y2K computer bug should be easily dismissed, we would do well to place Y2K in proper perspective. Due to the prosperity enjoyed in much of the Western world, it is easy to forget the horrific suffering that Christians in other countries have experienced this century. It has been stated that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. It would be myopic for Western Christians to interpret a downturn in the economy as a signal for the second coming when our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries have been experiencing the type of oppression and suffering most of us cannot even imagine.

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

While this may sound frightening to some, it also points to a tremendous opportunity for the Christian to demonstrate the love of Christ to the world. There will be many people who will be caught unprepared for any disruption in society. Even now there are ministries like Joseph Project 2000 that are gearing up to meet the needs of Christians and non-Christians alike should the situation arise. It is unfortunately true that personal prosperity can often lead to a rejection of God's provision. Christians need to be willing to share their resources and God's love with others if in fact there is a breakdown in society. It would appear that the Christian church has a golden opportunity right now to exercise its prophetic ministry of proclaiming God's Word for this generation. All too often we seem to be waiting for a future cataclysm where God Himself will act in a most direct way, rather than acknowledging our responsibility to act as His ambassadors to our contemporaries. This is why we must keep in perspective both the imminence *and* the delay of Christ's return. Any delay in the Lord's return is a reminder of God's great mercy and patience, who desires that none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

Notes

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

2. CNN.com, "Falwell says Antichrist probably is on Earth now," January 15, 1999.
3. Steve Rabey, "Apocalyptic Sales Out of This World." *Christianity Today* (March 1, 1999), 19.
4. M. E. Dieter, "Adventism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 15-16.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 150-153.
6. W. A. Hoffecker, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 292-293.
7. *The Go2Net Network*, January 9, 1999.
8. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), 211 (See the entire chapter on 'The Revelation' for very helpful guidelines for the interpretation of apocalyptic literature.)
9. G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 33-34.

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Churches That Equip

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

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

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

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

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims, "it's just more difficult." Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today's postmoderns.

Xenos' "Conversation and Cuisine" gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it's not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include "To judge or not to judge,"

“Forgiveness in relationships,” “Views of the afterlife,” and current events.

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

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

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

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

Kellie Carter’s New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother’s

death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

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

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

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

Spreading the Passion

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

“Ephesians tells us to equip the church,” he notes. “People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home.” He and his co-workers seek to use all three

levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

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

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

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

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

The experience "taught me why I believe what I believe," Jeff remembers. "Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn't have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend

the faith effectively.” He continues to apply what he’s learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

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

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

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus’ deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song’s “Jesus Under Fire” class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

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

Issues and Answers

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

secular world.

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

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

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

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

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

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

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

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Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution

Strengthens the Church

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

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



Background

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

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

Reasons for Persecution

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

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.[\[1\]](#)

People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

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

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

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.[{4}](#)

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

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what

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

Emperors

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

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

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.[{10}](#) Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."[{11}](#) Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since...A 'vast multitude' of

Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner.”[{12}](#) Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.[{13}](#) It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.[{14}](#)

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

Trajan

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

Trajan responded with a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. “They must not be ferreted out,” he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.[{18}](#)

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

that I may win Christ Jesus.”[{20}](#)

Hadrian

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

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat “indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it.”[{23}](#) Philip Schaff tells us that “he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion.”[{24}](#) Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor (“the personal embodiment of the sovereign state”[{25}](#)). “It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false, ... Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as ‘Lord.’”[{26}](#)

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the

local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.[{27}](#) After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.[{28}](#)

Marcus Aurelius

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

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

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.[{32}](#) In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters.[{33}](#) "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were

shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil.”[{34}](#) It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina “strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ.”[{35}](#) “At last,” Schaff tells us, “the people grew weary of slaughter,” and the persecutions died down.[{36}](#)

Septimius Severus

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

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.[{38}](#) Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.[{39}](#) Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.[{40}](#) A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.[{41}](#) A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.[{42}](#)

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

Decius Trajan

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, “This was the signal for a

persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.[{43}](#)

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

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

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.[{48}](#) Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

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

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned;

all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death.”{50} A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, “and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine.”{51} As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: “All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed”{52} against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

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

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

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”{54} Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that “most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God

without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

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

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

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.[\[55\]](#) So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a "climate of hate." Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? "Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too." By God's grace we don't endure serious suffering, at

least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.[\[56\]](#)

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

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

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.
6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Nero," by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.
11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion*

- and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. *Ibid.*, 381.
 13. *Ibid.*, 381-82.
 14. *Ibid.*, 252, 329-330.
 15. *EB*, "Nero."
 16. Bruce, 171.
 17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
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 19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
 20. Foxe, 17.
 21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
 22. Ferguson, 569.
 23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
 24. *Ibid.*, II:50.
 25. Bruce, 173.
 26. *Ibid.*, 173.
 27. *Ibid.*, 174.
 28. *Ibid.*, 174.
 29. Schaff, 56.
 30. *Ibid.*, II:54.
 31. Bruce, 178.
 32. Schaff, 55.
 33. *Ibid.*, 55.
 34. *Ibid.*, 56.
 35. Bruce, 178-79.
 36. Schaff, 56.
 37. *Ibid.*, 57.
 38. Bruce, 179.
 39. Schaff, 57.
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 41. Schaff, 58.
 42. *Ibid.*, 58; Bruce, 180.
 43. *Ibid.*, 60.

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

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Reaching The World That Has Come to Us

World Missions in Perspective

What images or conceptions enter your mind when you hear the phrase *world missions*? Do you think of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests? Do you think

of sparsely attended meetings featuring pictures of a world totally unrelated to your day-to-day life? Or does the phrase *world missions* evoke a sense of excitement and opportunity?

Though the phrase *world missions* never appears in Scripture, the concept of penetrating every culture in the world with the message of God's gracious provision through Christ, captures one of the most important themes of the Bible! From Genesis to Revelation, world missions is at the heart of God's purpose on earth.

Immediately following the record of God's judgment at Babel, which resulted in the division of the human race into diverse nations and cultures, we read of God's selection of Abram and his descendants as His special people. God promised to make of Abram's seed "a great nation" and to "make great their name" (Gen. 12:1-2). But He made it clear that beyond His intention to bless the children of Abram, God had a multicultural purpose in view: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was God's design that through Israel He might reach a world that had spurned His love.

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is found at the end of Matthew's Gospel; we call it the Great Commission. Among the final words of Jesus were his instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). And for the past two thousand years the church has been on a mission to penetrate every culture with the message of God's grace. In this way we've filled the role of Abram's seed in bringing God's blessing to "all the families of the earth" by going into all the world with the gospel.

But what of the two millennia that have transpired between God's declaration to Abram of His multicultural purpose, and Jesus' pronouncement of the Great Commission? How did God fulfill His purpose to bless all nations before the church existed? He did it through His people, Israel. A hint is given, I believe, in a divine statement recorded by the

prophet Ezekiel: "This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her" (Ezek. 5:5). A glance at a world map will reveal that God placed Israel at the crossroads of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. He could not have chosen a more strategic location through which to influence the entire world! As diplomats, merchants, and armies traversed the world, they inevitably passed through that tiny strip of land which God had deeded to Abram's seed!

When King Solomon offered his prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem, he included these words: "Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Thy people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Thy name's sake (for they will hear of Thy great name and Thy mighty hand, and of Thine outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear Thou in heaven..., and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee..." (1 Kings 8:41-43).

For two thousand years at least, God's method for fulfilling His multicultural purpose, rather than sending His people to the nations of the world, was to bring the world to His people. The Great Commission, issued after two thousand years, reflected an adjustment in God's method. But as we shall see, it did not mark an end to His practice of bringing the world to His people, wherever they might be.

World Missions In Reverse

In the fifth chapter of Revelation we read of the vision of the throne of God granted to the apostle John, and of the heavenly worship of Christ. In the course of the vision, the apostle hears sung these words: "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). This heavenly anthem makes note of the fulfillment of a purpose which God declared nearly four thousand years ago, to extend his grace to every

nation on earth.

This purpose has been fulfilled during the past two thousand years primarily through the response of faithful Christians to Jesus' Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But as we discussed above, the Great Commission, rather than signaling the beginning of the fulfillment of God's multicultural purpose, simply reflected an adjustment in God's method of carrying it out. For centuries, God had been reaching out to a spiritually needy world not primarily by sending His people to the world, but by bringing the world to His people. He did it by placing His people Israel at the crossroads of three continents, with the intent of using their influence to draw the nations of the world to Himself.

To prepare them for this special assignment, God gave His people Israel some very specific instructions with regard to how they should conduct themselves toward these "alien visitors." First, He said, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Lev. 19 33-34a). International visitors were to receive a warm and loving welcome in Israel. This alone would make Israel unique among the nations of the world!

But second, they were to give the alien an opportunity to know God, through exposure to the Scriptures. In giving instructions concerning the reading of Scripture at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord said, "Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God" (Deut. 31:11-12).

What is of interest to us, however, is that even with the giving of the Great Commission to go into all the world with the gospel, God continued to bring the world to his people,

wherever they might be.

This was evident, for instance, even on the day of Pentecost itself. As the Holy Spirit was giving birth to the church, it's recorded in the book of Acts that "there were Jews living in Jerusalem...from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). At the church's inception, God had brought the world to His people.

A while later we read that a man had come to Jerusalem to worship, who "was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure" (Acts 8:27). As he was returning to Ethiopia, he was intercepted by Philip, whom God had directed across his path. As the church was growing, God continued to bring the world to His people.

A bit later we read of "a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort" (Acts 10:1). Through a series of extraordinary circumstances, God led Peter to Cornelius' house to explain to him the gospel through which he came to know Christ.

Throughout the church's history, God has continued to fulfill His purpose to extend His grace to every nation, not only by sending His people to the world, but also by bringing the world to His people. And the instructions He gave to Israel concerning their treatment of the international visitor are as valid for us today in our own situation as they were for them so many centuries ago!

The World at Our Doorstep

Most Christians have a sincere desire to be involved in the work of world missions, and faithfully pray for and contribute to those missions that God has laid on their hearts. Yet few of us realize that it's possible to be involved in the world's most exciting enterprise in an even more direct way, by

befriending and ministering to the world of international students whom God has brought to us!

Every year approximately half a million students from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled in the colleges and universities of the U.S., more than in any other country! And I agree with Rev. Billy Graham when he said that the presence of these future world leaders constitutes one of the most strategic missions opportunities for the church today. Consider for a moment just a few facts about this group of international students.

First, more than half of these students generally come from countries that restrict or prohibit traditional Christian ministry within their borders. It's difficult to carry on the work of Christian ministry in countries like China, Malaysia, or Nepal. Yet each of these countries sends many students to the U.S. every year. In fact, approximately sixty percent of the international students in the U.S. come from what is known as the "10/40 Window." This is the group of countries located in the area between the 10th and 40th degree northern parallels, in which 90 percent of the world's "unreached peoples" reside! As one person has put it, "The door into these countries may be closed or barely open, but the door out is wide open!"

The second fact about these international students is that they compose the pool from which many of the world's future leaders will emerge. Mark Hanna, in a talk delivered at Park Street Church in Boston in 1975, said that one-third to one-half of the world's top positions in politics, business, education and the military would be filled in the following twenty-five years by foreign students then attending colleges and universities in the United States.[\[1\]](#) How much more could this be true today! Consider this list of just a few of the scores of international leaders who received their college education in the U.S.: Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador studied at Notre Dame; Corazon Aquino studied at the College

of Mount St. Vincent in New York; Ingvar Carlsson of Sweden studied at Northwestern; Andreas Papandreu of Greece studied at Harvard, as did King Birendra Bir Bikram Shad Dev of Nepal. As recently as 1987, some forty heads of state were educated in America.

Not only do many international students originate from countries that restrict Christian ministry, and not only are many of them destined to fill positions of leadership in their home countries, but while they are here they're generally more receptive to considering new ideas than they would be at home. And not only this, but these students are invariably in need of genuine friendship during their stay in the U.S.

Some time ago a study was done to determine the factors which contributed to the adjustment of international students to their stay in America. It was found that those who were best adjusted to their sojourn in the U.S. had two things in common. First, they had a close friend from their home country. And second, they had forged a close friendship with an American. Yet it was also found that no more than twenty percent of international students have such a friendship with an American, and fewer still have ever stepped foot inside an American home!

Students Among Us

In the 1950s a young man from Ethiopia came for military training to Aberdeen, Maryland. During the course of his stay, as the result of unfortunate experiences, he became embittered against America, and against the Christian faith. After his training here he returned to Ethiopia, and in 1974 participated as a key figure in the military coup which resulted in the establishment of a Marxist regime. Among his actions as head of state over the new government, were the launching of a campaign to root out "alien" religion in Ethiopia. In a speech to the nation, he named missionaries as the number one source of "imperialist infiltration" in

Ethiopia. Many missionaries were expelled, and many national Christians were imprisoned. Churches were closed, and the formerly Christian radio station was converted into a voice for Marxist propaganda. The student's name was Mengistu Mariam.

About the time Mengistu was returning to Ethiopia, another student by the name of Tuisem Shishak arrived in Chicago from India, and later completed his Ph.D. in education at the State University of New York-Buffalo. While he was here Christian friends encouraged Tuisem in his faith, and encouraged him in his vision to return to India to establish a Christian college. In 1974 he did exactly that, founding Patkai Christian College, the first Christian liberal arts college in India. Since then, hundreds of graduates have entered India's society to fill positions of leadership in business, government, agriculture, the arts, and Christian ministry.

About the time Tuisem Shishak was returning to India, a Muslim student from Afghanistan arrived to study at an east coast university. In 1980 he received his Ph.D. in education. While he was here, as the result of being befriended by a Christian family, he came to faith in Christ. This student went on to translate Christian educational materials into his native tongue of Dari, and to record gospel broadcasts transmitted into Afghanistan, Pakistan, and southern Russia.

A number of years ago, Hal Guffey (former president of International Students, Inc.) was speaking to a group of Christians about the opportunity to befriend international students. At the end of his talk a young lady from another country approached him. She told him that though her father had not become a Christian as a result of his student days in the U.S., nonetheless he had returned home with a favorable impression of Christians. Many years later he found himself in a position to decide whether Christian missionaries should be allowed to remain in his country. He decided they should be allowed to stay.

These are just a few of the thousands of similar stories that could be told about students who have come to America, and have returned to make a contribution in their home countries. While they were here, their attitudes toward the U.S. and toward American Christianity were indelibly shaped by their personal experiences. Some of them returned with an attitude that could be characterized as less than friendly. Others have returned with at least a positive impression of America and American Christians. And not a few have taken with them a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, as a result of their encounter with Christian friends.

Reaching Out

We've noted that at least half of these students come from countries that restrict or prohibit Christian ministry. We've also noted that at least 80 percent of these international students eventually return home, many of them to fill positions of leadership in their home countries—whether in business, education, government, or some other field. Some believe that as many as half of the world's future leaders are studying at American universities today.

We also recounted some of the stories of international students who have studied among us, and who returned home with attitudes that determined their future actions toward the work of Christ. Some returned to do much harm. Others returned, not only as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, but as effective leaders in Christian ministry in their own country.

In the case of the latter, God invariably used an American Christian who was willing to invest a little of his time in befriending and encouraging an international student in his pursuit of a relationship with God. In surveying international students who have come to know Christ during their stay in the U.S., two elements were voiced over and over again. The first was that they had enjoyed more than a merely surface relationship with a Christian friend. Someone had taken the

initiative to express real love and concern to them, and had demonstrated a life of Christian integrity. Not that they had attempted to project an image of perfection or an impeccable spiritual life. But in some way a life of genuine love and faith had made an impact they could not forget. Several years ago, in the wake of the bloody incident at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, American Christians acted to assist students from China in the U.S. who had extraordinary needs. I remember one student who said in my presence, "You Christians really care about us, don't you." Another student who was from India stated publicly that though he had not yet become a Christian, nonetheless Christians had expressed the most genuine concern to him and he counted them as his closest friends. He has since come to faith in Christ.

The other element God used in drawing these students to Himself was a careful exposure to the Scriptures. In many cases, we may be surprised to learn that our international friend has never even opened a Bible before we invite him or her to study it with us. I recall one Chinese student who stated to me at the outset of a personal study, "This is my first exposure to the Bible." Another student agreed to meet over lunch once a week to study the Scriptures. He told me as we began our series of studies, "I'm open to God." Several months later, after completing an overview of the life of Christ, I asked him who he believed Jesus Christ to be. He said to me, "Jesus is the Son of God. And He is my Savior."

A number of years ago, a Muslim student from Jordan was studying at a major university in southern California. He was befriended by a Christian worker on his campus, who shared with him the message of the gospel. At first, this student said he was not interested. But over time, and as a result of this Christian's consistent love toward this student, he came to know Jesus Christ in a personal way. Later, this student decided to attend an evangelical seminary here in the U.S., and eventually returned to found the first evangelical

seminary in Jordan. What made the difference in this student's life, and in the future of the church in Jordan? The faithful love and witness of one Christian in southern California.

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Notes

1. Lawson Lau, *The World at Your Doorstep* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13.

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To learn more about ministry to international students, we highly recommend that you write to International Students, Inc., requesting information on how to launch such a ministry in your home church (or just on a personal basis), and for a list of their published materials. You can contact them at:

International Students, Inc.

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Campus Christianity

Spiritual Wastelands 101

In the fall of my junior year in college, I had been a Christian for only a year. Since I had been involved in a Christian group on campus, however, I felt I had learned a great deal about my faith. As a science major I had completed most of my requirements for my degree, and I was looking forward to taking electives in my major of animal ecology. However, I still had a couple of hours in humanities to fulfill, not my most favorite subject. While I was looking for a humanities elective, I came across an English course entitled "Spiritual Wastelands." I remember thinking to myself, "That looks interesting. I wonder what spiritual wastelands this course is about?" With my newfound interest in spiritual things, I decided to enroll.

On the first day of class, I was horrified the minute the instructor walked into the room. He wore an old Army fatigue jacket, a blue work shirt open to the middle of his hairy chest, ratty blue jeans, sandals, long tangled hair, and a beard. He punctuated his appearance with a leather necklace containing what looked like sharks' teeth. To make it worse, he proceeded to go around the room and ask every student why he or she took this course. I don't really remember what the other students said but when he got around to me, I sheepishly replied that I was a Christian and that I was interested in knowing what kind of spiritual wastelands he was going to talk

about. Immediately, with a look of malevolent glee, he exploded: "You're a *Christian*? I want to *hear* from you!"

Needless to say, if there had been a place to hide, I would have found it. As you may guess, the only spiritual wasteland he wanted to talk about was Christianity. I was like a babe who had been thrown to the wolves. Our class discussions, more often than not, were two-sided: the instructor versus me. Hardly anyone else ever spoke up. To say that I found myself floundering like a fish out of water would be an understatement. Occasionally my questions and comments would hit the mark. But I am convinced, as I look back, that even that degree of success was purely the grace of God.

Since that time, I have spent twelve more years in the university environment as both an undergraduate and graduate student. I have learned a great deal about how a Christian student should relate to the academic community, and I would like to share with you four principles for effective Christian witnessing in that setting. I think you will also find that these principles will prove to be an effective guide in any sphere of life.

Approach your studies from a Christian worldview. We need to think Christianly. The only way to accomplish this is to be continually involved in the process of knowing God.

Realize that the job of the student is to learn—not to preach. A teachable spirit is highly valued. This may seem obvious to you, but believe me, it isn't obvious to everyone.

Pursue excellence. Every exam, every paper, every assignment must be pursued to the best of our ability, as unto the Lord.

Be faithful to the task—leave the results (grades) to God. Do not get hung up on the world's definition of success.

Think Christianly

All of our thoughts are to be Christ-centered, including those expressed in a university classroom. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that “we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” All knowledge is to be encompassed by a Christian worldview. In other words, we should try to see all knowledge through the eyes of Jesus. This all sounds well and good, but how do we do that?

The only way to think and see as Jesus does is to know Him. This brings us to the basics of the Christian life. There are numerous demands on the time of a student. There are always experiments to do, books to read, papers to write, exams to study for, assignments to turn in, classes to attend. This is doubly true for graduate students, who spend their entire time seemingly three steps behind where they are supposed to be. Let’s not forget the demands of a girlfriend or boyfriend, family, exercise, and just plain having fun. How is one supposed to find time for regular personal devotions, worship on Sunday mornings, fellowship with other believers, and the study of God’s Word? These activities can all take a serious bite out of the time the university demands from a student. But this is the only way to draw closer to God and to understand His ways.

By being faithful in spiritual things, we trust God to honor the time spent and to bring about His desired results in our academic pursuits despite our having less free time than most non-Christians. Christian campus groups can be of tremendous help in these matters through training, Bible studies, and fellowship with believers who are going through the same struggles you are.

For those times when trouble does arise in the classroom, and you feel that your faith is being challenged and you are confused, an enormous amount of assistance is available to you. The manager of your local Christian bookstore can be a

great help in finding books that deal with your problem. Organizations such as Probe Ministries can also help steer you in the right direction with short essays, position papers, and bibliographies. Dedicated and highly educated Christians have addressed just about every intellectual attack on Christianity. There is no reason to feel like you have to do it on your own. That was my mistake in the "Spiritual Wastelands" course. It never even occurred to me to seek help. I could have represented my Lord in a much more credible way if I had only asked.

There are no shortcuts to living the Christian life. We cannot expect to emerge from the university with a truly Christian view of the world if we put our walk with the Lord on hold while we fill our heads with the knowledge of the world. Remember! We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. In order to do that, we must know Him; in order to know Him, we must spend time with Him. There were many times in my college career when higher priorities prevented me from spending the amount of time I felt necessary to prepare for an exam, paper, or presentation, but I always found God to be faithful.

During my doctoral studies, we moved into a new house and the boys were ages 4 and 2. The room they were going to share desperately needed repainting and we were having new bunk beds delivered on Monday, the same day of an important cell biology exam. The professor writing this exam was the one in whose lab I had hopes of working for my doctoral project. So I needed to do well.

The room was small and the beds were large, so they needed to be constructed inside the room. This meant the room had to be painted before the beds arrived. If I paint, I lose critical study time for an important exam. If I study, the room goes unpainted and I have an unhappy wife and a difficult task getting to it later. I chose to paint the room. I had a total of three hours of study time for the exam! I entered the exam

free of tension knowing I did my best and it was in God's hands. I had no idea how I did on the exam, but when the grades came out, I received the second highest grade in the class and the best exam score in my tenure as a graduate student! The professor was impressed enough to allow me to begin working in her lab.

Cultivate a Teachable Spirit

I have run across numerous professors whose only encounters with Christians were students who simply told them that they were wrong and the Bible was right. Most professors do not have much patience with this kind of approach. It is a great way to gain enemies and demonstrate how much you think you know, but it does not win anybody to Christ.

Some Christian students have the impression that when they hear error being presented in university classroom, it is their duty to call out the heavy artillery and blast away. This is not necessarily so. As a student, your job is to learn, not to teach. In my education, I reasoned that in order to be a *critic* of evolution, I needed to first be a *student* of evolution and demonstrate that I knew what I was talking about. Once professors realized I was serious about wanting to understand evolution, when I began to ask questions, they listened. In the end my professors and I often had to agree to disagree, but we all learned something in the process, and I built relationships that could grow and develop in the future.

The most effective tactic in the classroom is the art of asking questions. This approach accomplishes three things. First, you demonstrate that you are paying attention, which is somewhat of a rarity today. Second, you demonstrate that you are truly interested in what the instructor is talking about. All good teachers love students with teachable spirits, but not students who are so gullible as to believe unquestioningly everything they say. Third, as you become adept at asking just the right question that exposes the error of what is being

taught, you allow the professor and other students to see for themselves the lack of wisdom or truth in the idea being discussed. Truth is truth, whether expressed by a believer or a pagan. However, non-Christians will believe other non-Christians much more readily than they will a fanatical Christian waving a Bible in his hand.

As a graduate student, I was in a class with faculty and other graduate students discussing a new discipline called sociobiology, the study of the biological basis for all social behaviors. One day we were discussing the purpose and meaning of life. In an evolutionary worldview, this can only mean survival and reproduction. Disturbed at how everyone was accepting this, I said, "We have just said that the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce. If that is true, let me pose this hypothetical situation to you. Let's suppose I am dead and in the ground and the decomposers are doing their thing. Since you say there is no afterlife, this is it. It's over! What difference does it make to me now, whether I have reproduced or not?" After a long silence, a professor spoke up and said, "Well, I guess that ultimately, it doesn't matter at all." "But wait," I responded. "If the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce, and ultimately—now you tell me—that doesn't matter either, then what's the point? Why go on living? Why stop at red lights? Who cares?!" After another long silence, the same professor spoke up and said, "*Well, I suppose that in the future, those that will be selected for will be those who know there is no purpose in life, but will live as if there is.*" What an amazing and depressing admission of the need to live a lie! That's exactly the point I wanted to make, but it sank in deeper when, through my **questions**, the **professor** said it and not me. When Jesus was found by His parents in the temple with the priests, He was listening and asking them questions—probably not for His benefit, but for theirs (Luke 2:46).

We are all familiar with 1 Peter 3:15, which says, "Sanctify

Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.” This verse is a double-edged sword that most of us sharpen only on one side or the other. Many are prepared to make a defense, but they leave destruction in their wakes, never exhibiting gentleness or reverence. Others are the most gentle and reverent people you know, but are intimidated by tough questions and leave the impression that Christianity is for the weak and feeble-minded. The latter need to go back and read a few important passages:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Acts 17

(The story of what happened when Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel in Thessalonica, Berea, and the Areopagus in Athens.)

Paul was a firm believer in the intellectual integrity of the gospel. The “staunch defender” needs to remember that Jesus told His disciples that the world would know that we are Christians by the love we have for one another (John 13:34-35) and that we are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-47). Paul exhorted the Romans not to repay evil with

evil, but to repay evil with good and to leave vengeance to the Lord (Rom. 12:17-21). Finally, the writer of Proverbs tells us that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up wrath (Prov. 15:1), and that the foolish man rages and laughs and always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back (Prov. 29:9,11).

Pursue Excellence

Nothing attracts the attention of those in the academic community as much as a job well done. There is no argument against excellence. In Colossians 3:17 Paul tells us, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." If we are to do everything in Jesus' name, He deserves nothing less than the best that we can do. How many of our papers and exams would we be comfortable stamping with the words, "Performed by a disciple of Jesus Christ"? I think I would want to ask if I could have a little more time before I actually handed it in! Yet Paul admonishes us to hold to that standard in all that we do. This does not mean that every grade must be an A. Sometimes your best is a B or a C or even just getting the assignment done on time. The important thing is to try. It's important to be able to tell yourself that, with the time, resources, and energy you had available to you, you did your best. The road to excellence is tough, exhausting, and even frightening. It is hard going. But our Lord deserves nothing less.

Ted Engstrom, in his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, tells the story of a pastor who spent his spare time and weekends for months repairing and rebuilding a dilapidated small farm in a rural community. When he was nearly finished, a neighbor happened by who remarked, "Well, preacher, it looks like you and God really did some work here!" The pastor replied, "It's interesting you should say that, Mr. Brown. But I've got to tell you—you should have seen this place when God had it all

to Himself!”

It is certainly true that God is the source of all our strength, and all glory and honor for what we may accomplish is His. But, it is no less true that God has always chosen people to be His instruments—frail, mistake-prone, imperfect people. His servants have not exactly enjoyed a life of ease while in His service. Striving for excellence is a basic form of Christian witness. We pay attention to people who always strive to do their best. In the classroom, people may not always agree with what you say, but if they know you as a person who works diligently and knows what you are talking about, they will give your words great respect. And, if there is enough of the Savior shining through you, your listeners will come back and want to know more.

I am reminded of the impact of four Hebrew youths in the Babylonian culture during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (whom you may recognize by their Babylonian names: Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego). They entered the prestigious secular institution, “Babylon University,” and were immersed into an inherently hostile atmosphere. But Scripture says that

And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams . . . And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm (Daniel 1:17, 20).

You can be sure they were instructed in Babylonian literature and wisdom, not Hebrew, yet they excelled. If our God is indeed the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then He can not only protect us as we enter the university, but He can also prosper us. Imagine the testimony for Jesus Christ if the best

philosophers, the best doctors, the best poets and novelists, the best musicians, the best astrophysicists, and on and on, were all Christians. That would be a powerful witness!

As you pursue excellence, do not be deterred by mistakes. They are going to come, guaranteed. The pursuit of excellence is an attitude in the face of failure. Thomas Edison, the creator of many inventions including the light bulb and the phonograph, was never discouraged by failed experiments. He simply reasoned that he now knew of one more way that his experiment was not going to work. Mistakes were his education. The wise man admits and learns from his mistakes, but the fool ignores them or covers them up. We all admire someone who freely admits a mistake and then works hard not to repeat it.

Strive for Faithfulness, Not Success

As students in the university learn to approach their studies from a Christian worldview, as they grow to appreciate their place as people who are there to learn and not necessarily to confront, and as they begin to pursue excellence in everything they do, it is tempting for them to believe that God will bless whatever they set out to accomplish. Their primary focus becomes whether or not all of their efforts are successful. It can become depressing if they do not see the kind of results they expected God to bring about.

Soon after Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the poor in Calcutta, she was asked by a reporter in New York City how she could dedicate herself so completely to her work when there was no real hope of success. It was obvious she was not going to eliminate hunger, poverty, disease, and all the other ills of that densely populated city in India. In other words, he asked, if you can't really make a dent in the conditions these people live in, why bother? Her reply was simple, yet profound; she said, "God has not called us to success, but to faithfulness." How many times have we heard in witnessing seminars that our job is to share the

gospel and leave the results to God? What I hear Mother Teresa saying is that our responsibility is the same in everything we do.

Oswald Chambers, in his timeless devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, caused me to recall Mother Teresa and reflect on my own expectations. He said,

Notice God's unutterable waste of saints, according to the judgment of the world. God plants His saints in the most useless places. We say—God intends me to be here because I am so useful. Jesus never estimated His life along the line of the greatest use. God puts His saints where they will glorify Him, and we are no judges at all of where that is. (August 10)

The main point here is that we should be faithful to the task God has given to us rather than worry about whether or not we are achieving the results we think God should be interested in. When we begin thinking that “God is wasting my time and His,” we have probably stepped over the line. I spent five and a half years in the laboratory on doctoral experiments in molecular biology, experiments that never accomplished what I had planned. The most frustrating aspect was that these experiments did not result in work that was publishable in the scientific literature, which is the ultimate goal of any scientist. I had a great deal of confidence when I started this difficult research problem that the Lord and I would work it out. Well, we didn't. I never dreamed how much Mother Teresa's words concerning the value of faithfulness over success would be lived out in my own life. It has been a hard, hard lesson. And I don't believe I have a complete answer as to why God chose to deal with me in this way. Scientific publications seemed not just desirable but necessary in my future career; yet God is sovereign and He apparently has other plans. During those years, I learned a great deal about living the Christian life in the midst of difficult

circumstances. I can only pray that I will not forget what was so painful to learn.

Conclusion

In summary, orient your studies according to a Christian world view. Your main job as a student is to learn and to develop the skill of asking questions, and to keep the boxing gloves at home. Pursue excellence and remain faithful to the task to which God has called you, and leave the results to Him.

Suggested Reading

Oswald Chambers. *My Utmost for His Highest*. Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1963.

Ted Engstrom. *The Pursuit of Excellence*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982.

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Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society

Rick Wade provides a solid argument for the beneficial contributions of Christianity to Western culture in the areas of science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare.

What If You'd Never Been Born?

Do you remember this scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*?

GEORGE (cont'd): Look, who are you?

CLARENCE (patiently): I told you, George. I'm your guardian angel. [George, still looking at him, goes up to him and pokes his arm. It's flesh.]

GEORGE: Yeah, yeah, I know. You told me that. What else are you? What . . . are you a hypnotist?

CLARENCE: No, of course not.

GEORGE: Well then, why am I seeing all these strange things?

CLARENCE: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were not born.

GEORGE: Then if I wasn't born, who am I?

CLARENCE: You're nobody. You have no identity. [George rapidly searches his pockets for identification, but without success.]

GEORGE: What do you mean, no identity? My name's George Bailey.

CLARENCE: There is no George Bailey. You have no papers, no cards, no driver's license, no 4-F card, no insurance policy . . . (he says these things as George searches for them) [George looks in his watch pocket.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): They're not there, either.

GEORGE: What?

CLARENCE: Zuzu's petals. [George feverishly continues to turn his pockets inside out.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): You've been given a great gift, George. A

chance to see what the world would be like without you.[{1}](#)

Do you remember George Bailey's encounter with Clarence the angel? George didn't think life was worth living, and it was Clarence's job to show him he was wrong. To do so, he showed George what Bedford Falls would have been like if George had never been born.

In desperation, George races through town looking for something familiar. After observing him for a little while, Clarence utters this bit of wisdom: "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"[{2}](#) Inspired by the plot of *It's a Wonderful Life*, in 1994 D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe wrote a book titled *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*[{3}](#) The authors determined to show what the world would be like if, like George Bailey, Jesus had never been born.

Christianity has come under attack from many different directions. It is often derided as the great boogeyman of human civilization. It is presented as an oppressive force with no regard for the higher aspirations of humankind. To throw off its shackles is the way of wisdom.

Kennedy quotes Friederich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century philosopher whose ideas continue to have a profound effect on our society. Said Nietzsche: "I condemn Christianity; I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible of all the accusations that an accuser has ever had in his mouth. It is, to me, the greatest of all imaginable corruptions; it seeks to work the ultimate corruption, the worst possible corruption. The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its depravity; it has turned every value into worthlessness, and every truth into a lie, and every integrity into baseness of soul."[{4}](#)

This article will—we hope³/₄show just how beneficial

Christianity has been, even for its critics. Drawing from Kennedy and Newcombe's book in addition to other literature, we will examine the impact of Christian beliefs on society. The four areas we'll consider are science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare. A theme which will run throughout this discussion is the high value Christianity places on human beings. Far from being a source of oppression, the message of Christ serves to heal, set free, and provide protective boundaries.

Contributions to Science

Perhaps the area in which Christianity has been the most vociferously attacked in this century has been the area of science. Religion and science are thought by many to be like oil and water; the two simply don't mix. Religion is thought to offer superstition while science offers facts.

It would seem, however, that those who make such a charge haven't given much attention to the history of science. In their book, *The Soul of Science*,[{5}](#) authors Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton make a case for the essential role Christianity played in the development of science. The authors point out four general ways Christianity has positively influenced its development.[{6}](#)

First, Christianity provided important presuppositions of science. The Bible teaches that nature is real, not an illusion. It teaches that it has value and that it is good to work with nature. Historically this was an advance over pagan superstitions because the latter saw nature as something to be worshipped or as something filled with spirits which weren't to be angered. As one theologian wrote, "Nature was thus abruptly desacralized, stripped of many of its arbitrary, unpredictable, and doubtless terrifying aspects."[{7}](#)

Also, because it was created by God in an orderly fashion, nature is lawful and can be understood. That is, it follows

discernible patterns which can be trusted not to change. “As the creation of a trustworthy God, nature exhibited regularity, dependability, and orderliness. It was intelligible and could be studied. It displayed a knowable order.”[{8}](#)

Second, Christianity sanctioned science. Science “was justified as a means of alleviating toil and suffering.”[{9}](#) With animistic and pantheistic cultures, God and nature were so closely related that man, being a part of nature, was incapable of transcending it, that is, of gaining any real control over it. A Christian worldview, however, gave man the freedom to subject nature to his needs-with limitations, of course-because man relates primarily to God who is over nature. Technology-or science applied-was developed to meet human needs as an expression of our God-given duty to one another. As one historian put it, “the Christian concept of moral obligation played an important role in attracting people to the study of nature.”[{10}](#)

Third, Christianity provided motives for pursuing scientific knowledge. As scientists learned more about the wonders of the universe, they saw God’s glory being displayed.

Fourth, Christianity “played a role in regulating scientific methodology.”[{11}](#) Previously, the world was thought to work in perfectly rational ways which could be known primarily through logical deduction. But this approach to science didn’t work. Planets don’t have to orbit in circular patterns as some people concluded using deductive logic; of course, it was discovered by investigation that they didn’t. A newer way of understanding God’s creation put the emphasis on God’s will. Since God’s will couldn’t be simply deduced through logical reasoning, experimentation and investigation were necessary. This provided a particular theological grounding for empirical science.

The fact is that it was distinctly Christian beliefs which

provided the intellectual and moral foundations for the study of nature and for its application through technology. Thus, although Christianity and some scientists or scientific theories might be in opposition, Christianity and science are not.

Contributions to Human Freedom

One of the favorite criticisms of Christianity is that it inhibits freedom. When Christians oppose funding pornography masquerading as art, for example, we're said to be unfairly restricting freedom of expression. When Christians oppose the radical, gender feminism which exalts personal fulfillment over all other social obligations, and which calls for the tearing down of God-given moral structures in favor of "choice" as a moral guide, we're accused of oppression.

The problem is that people now see freedom not as self-determination, but as self-determination unhindered by any outside standard of morality. Some go so far in their zeal for self-expression that they expect others to assist them in the process, such as pornographic artists who expect government funding.

There are at least two general factors which limit or define freedom. One we might call the "rules of the game." The other is our nature.

The concert violinist is able to play a concerto because she knows the "rules of the game." In other words, she knows what the musical notation means. She knows how to produce the right sounds from the violin and when to produce them. She might want the "freedom" to make whatever sounds she wishes in whatever key and whatever beat, but who would want to listen? Similarly, as part of God's universe, we need to operate according to the rules of the game. He knows how life on earth is best lived, so we need to live according to His will and design.

Our nature also structures our freedom. A fish can try to express its freedom by living on dry land, but it won't be free long; it won't be alive long! We, too, are truly free only in so far as we live according to our nature-not our fallen nature, but our nature as created by God. This is really another way of looking at the "rules of the game" idea. But it's necessary to give it special focus because some of the "freedoms" we desire go against our nature, such as the freedom some want to engage in homosexual activity.

Some people see Christianity as a force which tries to inhibit proper expression of who we are. But it is the idea of helping people attain the freedom to be and do as God intended that has fueled much Christian activity over the years. For example, Christians were actively engaged in the battle against slavery because of their high view of man as made in God's image.[{12}](#)

Another example is feminism. Radical feminists complain that Christianity has been an oppressive force over women. But it seems to have escaped their notice that Christianity made significant steps in elevating women above the place they held before Christ came.[{13}](#)

While it is true that women have often been truly oppressed throughout history, even by Christian men, it is false that Christianity itself is oppressive toward them. In fact, in an article titled "Women of Renewal: A Statement" published in *First Things*,[{14}](#) such noted female scholars as Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roberta Hestenes, Frederica Mathewes-Green, and May Stewart Van Leeuwen stated unequivocally their acceptance of historic Christianity. And it's a sure thing that any of the signatories of this statement would be quite vocal in her opposition to real oppression!

The problem isn't that Christianity is opposed to freedom, but that it acknowledges the laws of our Creator who knows better than we do what is good for us. The doctrines of creation and

redemption define for us our nature and our responsibilities to God. His “rules of the game” will always be oppressive to those who seek absolute self-determination. But as we’ll see, it is by submitting to God that we make life worth living.

Contributions to Morality

Let’s turn our attention to the issue of morality. Christians are often accused of trying to ram their morality down people’s throats. In some instances this might accurately describe what some Christians have done. But for the most part, I believe, the criticism follows our simple declaration of what we believe is right and wrong and our participation in the political and social arenas to see such standards codified and enforced.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the high standards of morality taught in Scripture have served society well. Has Christianity served to make individuals and societies better and to provide a better way of life?

In a [previous article](#) I wrote briefly about the brutality that characterized Greco-Roman society in Jesus’ day.^{15} We often hear about the wondrous advances of that society; but do you know about the cruelty? The Roman games, in which “beasts fought men, men fought men; and the vast audience waited hopefully for the sight of death,”^{16} reveal the lust for blood. The practice of child exposure shows the low regard for human life the Romans had. Unwanted babies were left to die on trash heaps. Some of these were taken to be slaves or prostitutes.^{17} It was distinctly Christian beliefs that brought these practices to an end.

In the era following “the disruption of Charlemagne’s great empire”, it was the Latin Christian Church which “patiently and persistently labored to combat the forces of disintegration and decay,” and “succeeded little by little in restraining violence and in restoring order, justice, and

decency.”[{18}](#)

The Vikings provide an example of how the gospel can positively affect a people group. Vikings were fierce plunderers who terrorized the coastlands of Europe. James Kennedy says that our word *berserk* comes from their fighting men who were called “berserkers.”[{19}](#) Gradually the teachings of Christ contributed to major changes in these people. In 1020 A.D., Christianity became law under King Olav. Practices “such as blood sacrifice, black magic, the ‘setting out’ of infants, slavery and polygamy” became illegal.[{20}](#)

In modern times, it was Christians who led the fight in England against slavery.[{21}](#) Also, it was the teaching of the Wesleys that was largely responsible for the social changes which prevented the social unrest which might have been expected in the Industrial Revolution.[{22}](#)

In an editorial published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1986 titled “Religious Right Deserves Respect,”[{23}](#) Reo Christenson argues that conservative Christians have been vindicated with respect to their concerns about such things as drinking, the sexual revolution, and discipline in schools. He says that “if anybody’s values have been vindicated over the last 20 years, it is theirs.” He concludes with this comment: “The Religious Right is not always wrong.”

To go against God’s moral standards is destructive to individuals and societies. In a column which ran in the *Dallas Morning News* following the shootings at Columbine High School,[{24}](#) a junior at Texas A&M University asks hard questions of her parents’ generation including these: “Why have you neglected to teach us values and morals? Why haven’t you lived moral lives that we could model our own after?”[{25}](#)

Why indeed! In time, our society will see the folly of its ways by the destruction it is bringing on itself. Let’s pray that it happens sooner rather than later.

Contributions to Healthcare

Healthcare is another area where Christianity has made a positive impact on society. Christians have not only been involved in healthcare; they've often been at the forefront in serving the physical health of people.

Although some early Christians believed that disease came from God, so that trying to cure the sick would be going against God's will, the opposite impulse was also seen in those who saw the practice of medicine as an exercise of Christian charity.[{26}](#)

God had already shown His concern for the health of His people through the laws given through Moses. In his book, *The Story of Medicine*, Roberto Margotta says that the Hebrews made an important contribution to medicine by their knowledge of personal hygiene given in the book of Leviticus. In fact, he says, "the steps taken in mediaeval Europe to counteract the spread of 'leprosy' were straight out of the Bible."[{27}](#)

Of course, it was Jesus' concern for suffering that provided the primary motivation for Christians to engage in healthcare. In the Middle Ages, for examples, monks provided physical relief to the people around them. Some monasteries became infirmaries. "The best-known of these," says Margotta, "belonged to the Swiss monastery of St Gall which had been founded in 720 by an Irish monk; . . . medicines were made up by the monks themselves from plants grown in the herb garden. Help was always readily available for the sick who came to the doors of the monastery. In time, the monks who devoted themselves to medicine emerged from their retreats and started visiting the sick in their own homes." Monks were often better doctors than their lay counterparts and were in great demand.[{28}](#)

Christians played a significant role in the establishment of hospitals. In 325 A.D., the Council of Nicea "decreed that

hospitals were to be duly established wherever the Church was established," says James Kennedy.[{29}](#) He notes that the hospital built by St. Basil of Caesarea in 370 even treated lepers who previously had been isolated.[{30}](#)

In the United States, the early hospitals were "framed and motivated by the responsibilities of Christian stewardship."[{31}](#) They were originally established to help the poor sick, but weren't intended to provide long-term care lest they become like the germ-infested almshouses.

A key factor in making long-term medical care possible was the "professionalization of nursing" because of higher standards of sanitation.[{32}](#) Before the 16th century, religious motivations were key in providing nursing for the sick. Anne Summers says that the willingness to fracture family ties to serve others, a disciplined lifestyle, and "a sense of heavenly justification," all of which came from Christian beliefs, undergirded ministry to the sick.[{33}](#) Even if the early nursing orders didn't achieve their own sanitation goals, "they were, nevertheless, often reaching higher sanitary standards than those previously known to the sick poor."[{34}](#)

There is much more that could be told about the contributions of Christianity to society, including the stories of Florence Nightingale, whose nursing school in London began modern nursing, and who saw herself as being in the service of God; or of the establishment of the Red Cross through the zeal of an evangelical Christian; or of the modern missions movement which continues to see Christian medical professionals devote their lives to the needs of the suffering in some of the darkest parts of the world.[{35}](#) It is obvious that in the area of medicine, as in a number of others, Christians have made a major contribution. Thus, those who deride Christianity as being detrimental are either tremendously biased in their thinking or are ignorant of history.

Notes

1. Downloaded from the Internet at http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_19.html on May 11, 1999.
2. Downloaded from the Internet at http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_20.html on May 11, 1999.
3. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994).
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).
6. Pearcey and Thaxton, 36-37. Taken from John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19-33.
7. Pearcey and Thaxton, 25.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 36.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 36-37.
12. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Christianity."
13. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 376.
14. "Women of Renewal: A Statement," *First Things* No. 80 (February 1998): 36-40.
15. Rick Wade, ["The World of the Apostle Paul."](#)
16. Will Durant, *The History of Civilization: Part III, Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1944), 133-34.
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18. Joseph Reither, *World History at a Glance* (New York: The New Home Library, 1942), 144; quoted in Kennedy, 165.
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20. Sverre Steen, *Langsomt ble Landet vaart Eget* (Oslo, Norway: J.W. Cappelens Forlag, 1967), 52-53, quoted in Kennedy, 164-65. See also *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Scandinavia, History of."
21. Earl Cairns, *The Christian in Society: Biblical and Historical Precepts for Involvement Today* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1973), 78-91.
22. *Ibid.*, 67.
23. Reo M. Christenson, "Religious Right Deserves Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, September 1986.
24. Littleton, Colorado. Two young men killed 12 students and a teacher, and then killed themselves.
25. Marcy Musgrave, "Generation has some questions," *Dallas Morning News*, 2 May 1999.
26. Irvine Loudon, ed., *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55.
27. Roberto Margotta, *The Story of Medicine*, ed. Paul Lewis (New York: Golden Press, 1968), 36. Referenced in Kennedy, 142.
28. Margotta, 117-18.
29. Kennedy, 145.
30. *Ibid.*, 146. From Margotta, 102.
31. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 8. From Kennedy, 147.
32. Kennedy, 148. Quote is from Rosenberg, 8.
33. Anne Summers, "Nurses and Ancillaries in the Christian Era," chap. 12 in *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History*, 134.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See Kennedy, 149-154.

Rousseau: An Interesting Madman

Popular song lyrics often have a way of reflecting what many people think, but rarely articulate. Recently, a song with a catchy tune and lots of airtime verbalized a way of thinking about God that is quite popular. The song, *What God Said* by a group called the Uninvited begins with the lyrics, "I talked to God and God said 'Hey! I've got a lot of things to say; write it down this very day and spread the word in every way.'" This is a remarkably evangelistic idea in this day of absolute tolerance for other people's beliefs. However, this god who has revealed himself to the songwriter doesn't expect much from the listener. According to the first verse we are to floss between each meal, drive with both hands on the wheel, and not be too sexually aggressive on the first date. In the second verse god wants us to ride bikes more, feed the birds, and clean up after our pets.

The third verse gets a little more interesting. God supposedly reveals that humans killed his only son and that his creation is undone, but that he can't help everyone. These obvious references to the incarnation of Christ and the Fall of Adam set up the listener for the solution to mankind's situation which, according to the song, is to "start with the basics—just be nice and see if that makes things all right." The chorus drives home this theology by repeating often that "I talked to God and God said nothing special, I talked to God and God said nothing that we shouldn't already know, shouldn't already know."

This idea, namely that any revelation from God would consist primarily of common sense notions, is a product of the

Enlightenment and found an extraordinary voice in the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that all one needs to know about God has been revealed in nature or in one's own conscience. Rousseau is often called the father of the French revolution, a movement that exalted the worship of reason and attempted to purge the clergy and Christianity from French culture. Although Rousseau wasn't around for the bloodshed of the revolution itself, his idea of a natural theology helped to provide a framework for rejecting special revelation and the organized church.

Few people in history have caused such a wide spectrum of responses to their ideas. At his death, Rousseau's burial site became a place of pilgrimage. George Sand referred to him as "Saint Rousseau," Shelly called him a "sublime genius," and Schiller, a "Christ-like soul for whom only Heaven's angels are fit company." [\[1\]](#) However, others had a different perspective. His one and only true love, Sophie d'Houdetot, referred to him as an "interesting madman." Diderot, a long time acquaintance, summed him up as "deceitful, vain as Satan, ungrateful, cruel, hypocritical and full of malice." [\[2\]](#) In addition to anything else that might be said about Rousseau, he was at least an expert at being a celebrity. He was a masterful self-promoter who knew how to violate public norms just enough to stay in the public eye.

Interestingly enough, Rousseau's ideas have actually had greater and longer impact outside of France. Two centuries later, his natural theology plays a significant role in determining our society's view of human nature as well as how we educate our children. Thus it is important to consider the thoughts of Rousseau and see how they impact our culture today, especially in the realm of education.

Rousseau's Natural Theology

To begin our examination of the thoughts of Jean-Jacques

Rousseau and his impact on our view of human nature and education, we will turn our attention to the foundational thoughts of his natural theology.

Rousseau often claims in his writings that all he seeks is the truth, and he is very confident that he knows it when he sees it. Being a child of the Enlightenment, Rousseau begins with the Cartesian assumption that he exists and that the universe is real. He then decides that the first cause of all activity is a will, rather than matter itself. He states, "I believe therefore that a will moves the universe and animates nature. This is my first dogma, or my first article of faith."[{3}](#) He then argues that this "will" that moves matter is also intelligent. Finally, Rousseau writes that "This 'being' which wills and is powerful, this being active in itself, this being, whatever it may be, which moves the universe and orders all things, I call *God*."[{4}](#) So far, so good, but according to Rousseau, to guess the purpose of this being or to ask questions beyond immediate necessity would be foolish and harmful. Rousseau writes "But as soon as I want to contemplate Him in Himself, as soon as I want to find out where He is, what He is, what His substance is, He escapes me, and my clouded mind no longer perceives anything."[{5}](#)

The problem with Rousseau's view of God is that we can know so little of Him. Rousseau rejects special revelation and argues that it is only by observing nature and looking inward that we can perceive anything at all about the Creator. Rousseau perceives from nature that the earth was made for humans and that humanity is to have dominion over it. He also argues that humanity will naturally worship the Creator, stating, "I do not need to be taught this worship; it is dictated to me by nature itself."[{6}](#) In Rousseau's opinion, to seek any other source than nature for how to worship God would be to seek man's opinion and authority, both of which are rejected as destructive.

Rousseau believes that humans are autonomous creatures, and

that humanity is free to do evil, but that doing evil detracts from satisfaction with oneself. Rousseau thanks God for making him in His image so that he can be free, good, and happy like God.[{7}](#) Death is merely the remedy of the evils that we do. As he puts it, “nature did not want you to suffer forever.”[{8}](#)

Rousseau is clear about the source of evil. He writes, “Man, seek the author of evil no longer. It is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself. . . .Take away the work of man, and everything is good.”[{9}](#) It is reason that will lead us to the “good.” A divine instinct has been placed in our conscience that allows us to judge what is good and bad. The question remains that if each person possesses this divine instinct to know the good, why do so many not follow it? Rousseau’s answer is that our conscience speaks to us in “nature’s voice” and that our education in civil man’s prejudices causes us to forget how to hear it.[{10}](#) So the battle against evil is not a spiritual one, but one of educational methods and content.

Although Rousseau thought he was saving God from the rationalists, mankind is left to discern good and evil with only nature as its measuring rod, and education as its savior.

A Philosophy of Education

Whether you agree with his ideas or not, Rousseau was an intellectual force of such magnitude that his ideas still impact our thinking about human nature and the educational process two centuries later. His work *Emile* compares to Plato’s *Republic* in its remarkable breadth. Not only does the book describe a pedagogical method for training children to become practically perfect adults, but he also builds in it an impressive philosophical foundation for his educational goals. *Emile* is a very detailed account of how Rousseau would raise a young lad (Emile) to adulthood, as well as a description of the perfect wife for his charge. Along the way, Rousseau

proposes his natural theology which finds ardent followers all over the world today.

Although *Emile* was written in the suburbs of Paris, Rousseau's greatest impact on educational practice has actually been outside of France.[{11}](#) French educators have been decidedly non-Romantic when it comes to early childhood education. Rousseau had a great deal of influence on the inventor of the Kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, as well as the educational Romantics Johann Pestalozzi and Johann Herbart. These three educators' names are engraved on the Horace Mann building on the campus of Teachers College, Columbia University. Columbia has been, and continues to be, at the center of educational reform in America, and happens to have been the home of John Dewey, America's premier progressive thinker and educational philosopher. Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick further secularized and applied the thinking of Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart, and thus Rousseau.

The common bond that connects these educators is a Romantic view of human nature. Besides a general faith in the goodness of all humanity, there are two other Romantic fallacies that are particularly dangerous when carried to extremes. The first is what is called the doctrine of developmentalism, or natural tempo, which states that bookish knowledge should not be introduced at an early age.[{12}](#) Second is the notion of holistic learning, which holds that natural or lifelike, thematic methods of instruction are always superior.[{13}](#) Both ideas tend to be anti-fact oriented and regard the systematic instruction of any material at an early age harmful. This has had a profound effect on how we teach reading in this country. The ongoing battle between whole- language methods and the use of systematic phonics centers on this issue. When the Romantic view prevails, which it often does in our elementary schools, systematic phonics disappears.

Rousseau's theology and educational methods are tightly bound together. He argues against the biblical view that humanity is

fallen and needs a redeemer. He believes that our reason and intellect are fully capable of discerning what is right and wrong without the need of special revelation or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As a result, Rousseau argues that a proper education is man's only hope for knowing what limited truth is available.

Rousseau and Childhood Education

An interesting aspect of Rousseau's child-raising techniques is his reliance on *things* to constrain and train a child rather than people. Rousseau rightfully asserts that education begins at birth, a very modern concept. However, in his mind early education should consist mainly of allowing as much freedom as possible for the child. Rebellion against people is to be avoided at all costs because it could cause an early end to a student's education and result in a wicked child. He puts it this way: "As long as children find resistance only in things and never in wills, they will become neither rebellious nor irascible and will preserve their health better."[{14}](#) Rousseau believed that a teacher or parent should never lecture or sermonize. Experience, interaction with things, is a far more effective teacher. This dependence on experience is at the core of modern progressive education as well.

As a result, Rousseau was remarkably hostile towards books and traditional education's dependency on them. From the very beginning of *Emile*, he is adamant that books should play little or no part in the young man's education. He claims that, "I take away the instruments of their greatest misery—that is books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it. At twelve, Emile will hardly know what a book is."[{15}](#) At one point Rousseau simply says, "I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know."[{16}](#)

A corollary aspect of this negative view of books is

Rousseau's belief that children should never be forced to memorize anything. He even suggests that an effort be made to keep their vocabulary simple prior to their ability to read. This antagonism towards books and facts fits well with Rousseau's notion that people "always try to teach children what they would learn much better by themselves."[\[17\]](#)

He also believed that children should never memorize what they can not put to immediate use. Rousseau acknowledged that children memorize easily, but felt that they are incapable of judgment and do not have what he calls true memory. He argued that children are unable to learn two languages prior to the age of twelve, a belief that has been refuted by recent research.

Prior to that age, Emile is allowed to read only one book, *Robinson Crusoe*. Why *Crusoe*? Because Rousseau wants Emile to see himself as Crusoe, totally dependent upon himself for all of his needs. Emile is to imitate Crusoe's experience, allowing necessity to determine what needs to be learned and accomplished. Rousseau's hostility towards books and facts continues to impact educational theory today. There is a strong and growing sentiment in our elementary schools to remove the shackles of book knowledge and memorization and to replace them with something called the "tool" model of learning.

Rousseau's Philosophy and Modern "Tools"

Rousseau argued against too much bookish knowledge and for natural experiences to inform young minds. Today, something called the "tool" model carries on this tradition. It is argued that knowledge is increasing so rapidly that spending time to stockpile it or to study it in books results in information that is soon outdated. We need to give our students the "tools" of learning, and then they can find the requisite facts, as they become necessary to their experience.

Two important assumptions are foundational to this argument. First, that the “tools” of learning can be acquired in a content neutral environment without referring to specific information or facts. And secondly, that an extremely child-centered, experience driven curriculum is always superior to a direct instruction, content oriented approach.

The “tool” model argues that “love of learning” and “critical thinking skills” are more important to understanding, let’s say chemistry, than are the facts about chemistry itself. Some argue that facts would only slow them down. Unfortunately, research in the real world does not support this view of learning. Citing numerous studies, E.D. Hirsch contends that learning new ideas is built upon previously acquired knowledge. He calls this database of information “intellectual capital” and just as it takes money to make money, a knowledge framework is necessary to incorporate new knowledge. To stress “critical thinking” prior to the acquisition of knowledge actually reduces a child’s capacity to think critically.[\[18\]](#) Students who lack intellectual capital must go through a strenuous process just to catch up with what well-educated children already know. If children attempt to do algebra without knowing their multiplication tables, they spend a large amount of time and energy doing simple calculations. This distracts and frustrates children and makes learning higher math much more difficult. The same could be said for history students who never learn names and dates.

The second idea is that students should learn via natural experience within a distinctly passive curriculum. While there is wisdom in letting nature set as many of the limits as possible for a child—experience is probably the most powerful teaching method—Rousseau and progressive educational theory go too far in asserting that a teacher should never preach or sermonize to a child. At an early age, children can learn from verbal instruction, especially if it occurs along with significant learning experiences. In fact, certain kinds of

learning often contradict one's experience. The teaching of morality and democratic behavior involves teaching principles that cannot be experienced immediately, and virtually everything that parents or teachers tell children about sexual behavior has religious foundations based on assumptions about human nature.

The bottom line seems to be that if higher math, morality, and civilized behavior could be learned from simply interacting with nature, Rousseau's system would be more appealing. However, his version of the naturalistic fallacy—assuming that everything that is natural is right—would not serve our students well. Rousseau's observations about the student-teacher relationship fall short first because of his overly optimistic view of human nature and because we believe that there is truth to convey to the next generation that cannot be experienced within nature alone.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 27.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 273.
4. Ibid., 277.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 278.
7. Ibid., 281.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 282.
10. Ibid., 291.
11. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 81.
12. Ibid., 84.
13. Ibid.
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 66.
15. Ibid., 116.

16. Ibid., 184.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Hirsch, 66.

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Faith and Reason

Are faith and reason friends or foes? Does faith in Christ require checking your brain at the door? This essay presents 3 positions on faith and reason, from Tertullian, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Friends or Foes?

One of the more intriguing aspects of the *Indiana Jones* film trilogy is its focus on religious themes. In the third installment, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is involved in a search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. As the film reaches its climax, Indy must go through three tests in order to reach the Grail. After overcoming the first two obstacles, the final test required Indy to “step out” in faith, even though he was on one side of a cavern that appeared to be thirty feet across, without any visible way to reach the other side. Following the instructions from his father’s diary, Indy stepped into the void, and to his amazement, his foot came down on solid ground. It turned out that there was a bridge across the cavern but because the rocky texture of the bridge perfectly matched the facing wall of the cavern, the bridge was invisible from Indy’s perspective.

According to this scene, and enforced by general opinion, religious faith and human reason are opposites. Indiana Jones

simply could not understand how it was possible to reach the Grail without any visible means to do so; the implication is that his decision to step out was a forfeiture of his intellect. This idea that Christian faith is a surrender of our reasoning abilities is a common one in contemporary culture.

For many Christians, the scene that we've been discussing is a disturbing one. On the one hand, it is a moment of triumph. It seems to lend credence to the importance of religious faith. Then again, it portrays faith as being a mindless exercise. Indiana Jones is an intellectual college professor who is interested in the Grail primarily as an historical artifact. His leap of faith goes against everything he stands for. This reveals a tension that has existed in the church for centuries. Is faith in Christ a surrender of the intellect? Is godly wisdom in complete opposition to what Scripture calls "worldly wisdom"? There are many who question whether the Christian should even expose himself to teaching that is not consistent with the Word of God. For example, it is a frightening prospect for many Christian parents to consider sending their children off to a secular college where the Christian faith is often ridiculed or condemned. Still others want their children to be challenged by a secular education. They consider it part of the Christian's missionary mandate to confront secular culture with their very presence. In their mind, the tendency of Christians to separate themselves from secular environments leads to an isolationist mentality that fails to reach the lost for Christ.

As we examine the relationship of faith and reason for the Christian in this discussion, there are several questions to keep in mind. Is there such a thing as Christian philosophy, or is philosophy primarily opposed to theology? Should believers read literature that is not explicitly religious, or should we only read Christian literature? What about secular music or films? How we view the relationship between faith and

reason will reveal itself in how we answer these questions. We will try to shed light on these issues as we examine three distinctive positions that have been prominent throughout church history.

Earlier, we mentioned that in the popular film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy had to make a literal leap of faith. When he stepped into the “void” in order to reach the Grail, he was unable to see the pathway to the Grail, but his “blind faith” was rewarded when it turned out that the pathway was hidden by an optical illusion. He did what most people would consider suicidal. But is this a true picture of religious faith? Is faith or religious belief irrational? In the next section we will look at the answer of Tertullian, a Christian apologist from the early church who has been accused of saying this very thing.

Tertullian's Dilemma

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christ sometime around the year A.D. 197. It was he who asked the famous questions, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What have heretics to do with Christians?” Tertullian's major distinction was to create a metaphorical contrast between Athens, the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem, the central locale of divine revelation. Tertullian was convinced that the Christian faith and human wisdom were polar opposites. It was his conviction that God had revealed His plan of salvation in Scripture alone; to mix Scripture with the philosophy of pagans could only distort God's message. But does this mean that Tertullian believed that human wisdom is irrational? Let's look at the evidence.

Contemporary theologians who deny the rationality of Christian belief often quote Tertullian's statement that the crucifixion should be believed because it is absurd. He also said the fact of the Resurrection is certain because it is impossible. But these statements must be understood from the context of

Tertullian's own life and work. He himself utilized elements of Greek philosophy and logic that he believed to be compatible with Christian belief. The major emphasis in his writings was to contrast the coherence of Christianity with the inconsistency of his heretical opponents. When he does speak of the absurdity of Christian belief, he is actually referring to the unlikelihood that any human mind could conceive of God's redemptive plan. Like C. S. Lewis, he was convinced of the truth of the gospel by the very fact that no human being could possibly concoct such a story as is presented in Scripture. Certainly the Jews could not; the claim of Christ that He was God in the flesh was blasphemous to many of them. Nor could the Greeks create such a story; for them, the material world was inferior to the divine realm. God could not possibly assume human flesh in their philosophical reasoning. But for Tertullian, this was compelling evidence that the gospel is true! The religious and philosophical systems contemporary with the advent of Christianity would have prevented any human from simply making up such a fantastic tale. He concluded that the gospel had to originate in the mind of God himself.

To conclude, let's put Tertullian in the shoes of Indiana Jones. What would Tertullian do if faced with the prospect of crossing over the invisible bridge? My guess is that he would see such a step as consistent with God's way of directing His people. The key to understanding Tertullian's view of faith and reason is to consider what the unbeliever would think. Since most unbelievers would consider what Indiana Jones did as unreasonable, he would probably consider such an attitude as compelling proof that the person of faith must take such a step.

Tertullian, the early church apologist, was convinced that belief in the Scripture was the basis for the Christian life. He also considered Greek philosophy to be the basis for heresy in the Church. Unfortunately, he seemed to assume that all

Christians intuitively understood Scripture in the same way. His motto might have been “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” But it is one thing to believe; it is another thing to understand what we believe. Next, we will consider the ideas of Augustine, who is known by the phrase “faith seeking understanding.”

Augustine’s Solution

Augustine, who died in the year A.D. 430, recounts in his famous *Confessions* how as a young man he was constantly seeking for a philosophy that would be consistent and guide him to truth. At one point he abandoned any hope in his search and became a skeptic. But at the age of 33, Augustine came to accept the truth of the gospel. He recognized that the speculation of Greek philosophy was incapable in itself of bringing him to salvation. But, on the other hand, he could see that it had prepared him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and laid the groundwork by which he came to accept the claims of Christ. Augustine believed that the Scripture was the authoritative Word of God, but in interpreting difficult scriptural concepts such as the Trinity, he found it necessary to utilize his own philosophical training to explain the teaching of Scripture.

Whereas Tertullian considered faith in Christ’s revelation of himself to be the only thing worth knowing, Augustine emphasized both the priority of faith and its incompleteness without the help of reason. One of his great insights is that faith is the foundation for all knowledge. Christians are often ridiculed for their faith, as if “faith” and “gullibility” were synonyms. But Augustine reminds us that each of us must trust some authority when making any truth claim, and that “faith” and “trust” are synonyms.

Consider a few examples: Christians and non-Christians alike agree that water freezes at zero degrees centigrade. However, I myself have never performed that experiment; I simply trust

what reliable scientific studies have confirmed. Likewise, no one living today was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but all Americans celebrate that day as having been July 4, 1776. We trust the witness of those who were actually there. In other words, our knowledge *begins* with faith in some authority, just as Augustine emphasized.

But Augustine distinguished himself from Tertullian by acknowledging that philosophy does have a role in how the Christian understands God's revelation. Because humanity is made in the image of God, we are all capable of knowing truth. Augustine found in pagan philosophy helpful ideas that enabled him to elaborate God's Word. But it must be emphasized that his interest in pagan philosophy was not an end in itself, but rather a tool by which to grasp more deeply the meaning of Scripture.

What would Augustine have done if he had faced the choice of Indiana Jones? First, he would have needed scriptural support for such a choice. Secondly, he would have considered the logic of such a decision. Whereas Tertullian considered God's mind to be contrary to the philosophies of man, Augustine believed God created us to think His thoughts after Him. His was a reasonable faith. This is why his motto has been described as "faith seeking understanding."

The Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas

Now we turn to look at the teaching of the twelfth-century scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose own slogan has been called, "I understand in order to believe."

A good way to get a handle on Thomas's position is to recognize that his own motto is a reversal of Augustine's *faith seeking understanding*. It was Augustine who first explained the concept of *original sin*, which states that we are alienated from God at birth because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam. Thomas agreed that our moral conformity

to God had been lost, but he believed that sin had not completely corrupted our intellect. Thomas believed, therefore, that we could come to a basic knowledge of God without any special revelation. This is not to say that Thomas did not hold a high view of Scripture. Scripture was authoritative for Thomas. But he seemed to believe that divine revelation is a fuller explanation of what we are able to know about God on our own. For example, his attempts to prove the existence of God were based on the aftereffects of God's action in the world, such as the creation, rather than in the sure Word of Scripture. In contrast to Tertullian and Augustine, who placed faith in God's revelation of Christ as the foundation for knowledge, Thomas started with human reason and philosophy. His hope was to show that even people who reject the Scripture could come to believe in God through the use of their intellects. But the Scriptures were necessary since the human mind cannot even conceive of concepts such as the Trinity.

Thomas lived at a time when most of Aristotle's philosophy was first being introduced into the Latin language. This created quite a stir in the universities of the day. Up until that time, Augustine's emphasis on an education centered on Scripture was the dominant view. Thomas himself was educated in the tradition of Augustine, but he appreciated the philosophy of Aristotle as a witness to the truth. He found Aristotle to be more balanced in his approach to philosophy than Augustine had been. Whereas Augustine emphasized the eternal realm in his own philosophy, Aristotle's philosophy confirmed the importance of the natural world as well and assisted Thomas in his effort to create a comprehensive Christian philosophy which recognized that the material world was important because it had been created by God and was the arena in which His redemptive plan was to be fulfilled. Prior to Thomas, the tendency had been to downplay the physical world as greatly inferior to the spiritual world.

If we were to place Thomas in the shoes of Indiana Jones, it is likely that he would have stepped out as well. But he would have arrived at the decision for different reasons than Tertullian or Augustine. Because of his emphasis on the thinking ability of the human race and his emphasis on physical reality, he might have knelt down on the ground and felt for the hidden pathway before actually stepping out. Since he leaned toward utilizing reason and his own understanding to discover the bridge, he would not have depended solely on revelation to cross over like the others.

We will conclude our series as we evaluate the implications of the three different views of faith and reason that we have been examining in this discussion.

Implications

We have been examining three distinctive positions on the question of faith and reason. Basically, we have been attempting to discern whether or not human reason, as expressed in pagan philosophy, is a help or a hindrance to Christian theology.

The first position we addressed was that of Tertullian, who viewed the combination of divine revelation and Greek philosophy as the root of all false teaching in the church. We then showed that even though Augustine agreed with Tertullian that faith in divine revelation is primary for the Christian, they differed in that Tertullian emphasized *belief in* the Scriptures, while Augustine focused on the *understanding* of what one believes. That is why he was willing to incorporate pagan philosophy to help further his understanding of Christian theology. He was delighted to find pagans whose philosophy, though not Christian in and of itself, was in some way compatible with Christianity.

The third and final position we examined was that of Thomas Aquinas, who believed that all people could have a basic

knowledge of God purely through natural reason. He did not agree with Augustine that the human mind had been totally corrupted by sin at the Fall. This belief led to his elevation of the power of the mind and his appreciation of philosophy. Theology is the higher form of wisdom, but it needs the tools of science and philosophy in order to practice its own trade. Theology learns from philosophy, because ultimately theology is a human task.

How we view the relationship between faith and reason can have powerful implications for how the Christian engages society with the gospel. One of the problems with the apologetics of Tertullian is that he seemed to view all that opposed him to be enemies of the gospel, rather than as potential converts. This is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, when he proclaimed the gospel among the Greeks at Mars Hill. He did not condemn them for their initial failure to accept the Resurrection. Instead, he attempted to reach common ground with them by quoting some of their own philosophers, picking out isolated statements from pagan thinkers which were consistent with Scripture, while still maintaining the absolute truth of Scripture as his foundation. In this way, he was able to gain a hearing with some of his listeners. But this presupposes some familiarity with pagan thought. This familiarity made Paul a more effective witness to his audience.

Paul's attitude toward pagan philosophy seems to be consistent with those of Augustine and Aquinas. All three felt it was beneficial to know what the non-believer thought in order to communicate the gospel. How then can believers apply this attitude today without compromising their values? Perhaps it involves Christian parents listening with their children to the music they enjoy, and then constructively discussing its message. After all, many contemporary musicians utilize their music to proclaim their own philosophies of life. Or maybe it will mean watching a popular movie that has taken the country

by storm, with the goal of discerning its importance to the average viewer. Rather than criticizing literature, philosophy, film, or music that is not explicitly Christian, we may find that by attempting to appreciate their value or worth, no matter how meager, we may be better able to dialogue with, and confront, our post-Christian culture with the claims of Christ.

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