

The Debate Over the King James Version – Which Is the Best Translation for My Personal Use

Written by Rick Wade

Which version of the Bible is the most reliable and authoritative providing me with understanding of God's revelation? Rick Wade provides a balanced comparison of the King James Bible with other more recent translations to help you answer this question for yourself.

Introduction: What the Debate is About

Have you ever been in a Bible study where everyone in the group reads a verse . . . and there are two or three Bible versions being used? Following the train of thought can be difficult when a verse in one version clashes with the next verse in another version.

Since the 1940s, many new Bible versions have appeared on the market: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Living Bible, the Contemporary English Version, The Message, and many more. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the King James was still the dominant version. Today the New International Version leads sales followed by the KJV.(1)

For some people, the multiplicity of versions is a nuisance, but they accept it, believing that it is all a matter of personal preference. For others, however, this is a serious issue; not because of the inconvenience of multiple versions, but because they believe the King James Version is the only

correct version for the church.

These new versions came about because of the publication of a new Greek New Testament about a century ago. Defenders of the primacy of the KJV were very vocal in their opposition to the new Greek text and the new English versions which followed its publication. This issue is not as big today, but it remains problematic for some Christians. Thus, a discussion of the King James/modern version debate is useful with a focus on the New Testament, for that is where the main concerns lie.

This debate is argued on two levels. On one level, the focus is on the King James itself (remember that our English versions are translated from Greek texts). Some simply believe that this particular translation is the best one. They see a certain majesty in its language, and they appreciate its important role in the history of the church. It has served the church well, so there is no need to begin confusing things by bringing in all those other versions, they believe.

There are some Christians, however, who go further than that. They believe that the KJV is not only the *best* version; they insist that it is the only valid English version. Newer translations of Scripture do not reliably convey God's truth. Some arguments for this side are little more than angry diatribes which are often circular. For example, some say that since the new versions differ from the King James, they are bad versions. The supremacy of the KJV is simply assumed.(2)

Although arguments from tradition and style can be powerful, there might be other considerations which outweigh them. A significant problem with the KJV, of course, is the language. People who did not grow up using the KJV have a hard time understanding it. Some of its words are no longer in use, and the antiquated forms of many words impede the understanding of the text. Over time they can learn to understand it, but without any more compelling reasons than tradition and style, it is hard to see why they should bother.

On another level, this debate focuses on the Greek manuscripts from which the English versions are translated. Some “King James only” proponents believe that the Greek text underlying most of the newer versions is corrupt. As we will see, they present some good arguments for their position.

Because the Greek text is the critical issue in this debate, it will be the focus of our examination of the debate (we will not get too technical!). To set the stage, we will begin with a brief history of the King James Version.

A Brief History of the King James Version

Many of us have heard the joke about the King James Version: “If it was good enough for the apostle Paul, it is good enough for me!” Paul, of course, was fifteen and a half centuries too early for the KJV. The New Testament writers wrote in Koine Greek, the language of the common man in the first century A.D. The first complete English Bible was not produced until John Wycliffe produced his in the fourteenth century. He translated from the Latin Vulgate which was the most widely used version at that time.

The next major step in the development of the English Bible was Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament published in 1526 and portions of the Old Testament published later. Tyndale’s version was significant because it was translated from a newly published Greek New Testament rather than from the Vulgate.

After Tyndale’s, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible. In 1611 the King James Version was published to provide a Bible which could be used by both Anglicans and Puritans. Marginal notes reflecting any particular theological bias were removed, and the language used was that of the people.

I noted earlier that Tyndale used a Greek text for his translation. The first published Greek New Testament appeared in the year 1516. It was edited by Erasmus, a Dutch scholar. Erasmus had at his disposal no more than six Greek manuscripts (we have thousands at our disposal today). These manuscripts were part of what is called the *Byzantine* text family.

Although Erasmus' edition provided a great boost to the study of the New Testament, it had a number of problems. For one thing, none of his sources had the last six verses of the book of Revelation, so Erasmus translated from the Latin Vulgate back into Greek! Thus, in his text "several words and phrases may be found that are attested in no Greek manuscript whatsoever." (3) In the first two editions of his New Testament, Erasmus left out I John 5:7 because it did not appear in any of his Greek manuscripts. That verse reads: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." This omission created a furor, so he promised to include the verse in a later edition if it could be found in any Greek manuscript. One was brought forward, and, although Erasmus did not think the text was genuine, he kept his promise and included the verse. It is now believed to have been a very late and unreliable manuscript, and some think it was forged to include the verse. (4)

Erasmus' Greek text was reworked and reprinted by others including Robert Estienne who divided the text into verses. Theodore Beza then built upon Estienne's work, and his Greek text provided one of the major foundations for the King James Bible. The term *Textus Receptus*, or Received Text, came from a blurb in another Greek text produced in the early seventeenth century by the Elzevir brothers. This title is still used in connection with the King James, and it is one you will see again in this article.

Westcott and Hort

I noted earlier that the more substantial arguments for the “King James only” position focus on the Greek texts underlying the different versions. There are four significant issues in the debate involving these texts which I will develop: the science of textual criticism, the number of Greek manuscripts available, the history of the Greek texts, and the dates of the manuscripts.

Before getting into the debate itself, it will be helpful to mention the historical event which brought the debate to a head, and to introduce a central element in New Testament textual studies.

Between the thousands of Greek manuscripts available there are differences of one kind or another (although there are not any which effect doctrinal matters). Certain Greek manuscripts share enough similarities that they are believed to have come from the same source. Each of these groups is called a *text family* or a *text-type*. There are four text families which are generally agreed upon by scholars. The manuscripts which were used to produce the Textus Receptus (and later the King James Version) were of the Byzantine family. The other three text families generally agreed upon by scholars are the Alexandrian, the Caesarean, and the Western.(5)

The fundamental debate between scholars in the King James/modern version controversy is over the question of the most accurate Greek text family or families. Which of the four families, if any, most accurately represents what the New Testament authors wrote? The Byzantine text was the dominant Greek text from about the eighth century until the end of the nineteenth century.(6) In 1881, however, two scholars named Westcott and Hort published a new Greek New Testament which relied more on other text families than on the Byzantine family. Their Greek text became the basis of the New Testament portion of modern Bible translations.

Westcott and Hort evaluated the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament according to the principles of *textual criticism*. This is the science of the study of ancient texts, the originals of which are lost. Based upon their studies, they argued that the Byzantine text was *not* the closest to the original writings as the King James advocates claimed. It seemed to have combined readings from other text families, and some readings appeared to have been modified for greater clarity and understanding. Thus, they believed it was at least two steps removed from the original writings. Also, they found no clear evidence of its existence in the writings of the early church fathers, and there are no copies older than the fourth century. Those who agree with Westcott and Hort believe that the Byzantine text was produced in the fourth century probably in an attempt to give the church one New Testament (there were a number of different Greek texts being used at the time). Other text families, on the other hand, appear to have more original readings and *are* quoted by the early church fathers, and are thus closer to the originals. So, the conclusions drawn from the application of textual criticism along with the ages of the manuscripts led them to believe that the most accurate Greek text is to be found by drawing from all the Greek text families, especially the Alexandrian family.(7)

Supporters of the Byzantine or Received Text responded that it was inappropriate to use naturalistic methods of study such as textual criticism on Scripture. They said that this amounts to elevating man over God in determining what the Bible says.(8) They also argued that the vast numbers of Byzantine manuscripts along with the centuries of history behind this text family should not be set aside on the basis of a few manuscripts discovered relatively recently. They insisted that the Spirit of God would not allow His true word to lie dormant so long while the church was being guided by inferior texts.

Textual Criticism

As I noted above, those who argue for the Byzantine or Received Text say that it is improper to subject the Bible to the scrutiny of textual criticism. The Bible, being the inspired Word of God, is unique. One begins with it as inspired and then accepts what it says.

But those in the Westcott-Hort tradition note that we cannot simply shut our eyes to the fact that there *are* differences between the various Greek manuscripts, even those in the Byzantine family. Even those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture recognize that the original writings of the New Testament were inerrant, not the copies. It is our responsibility to apply the most sound principles we know of to determine what the original manuscripts said. This is the aim of textual criticism.

So, how does textual criticism work? Differences between Greek manuscripts are called variants. There are several causes of variants. Some are accidental, such as misspelled words or repeated or reversed words. Some resulted from a scribe not hearing a dictation correctly. Also, deliberate changes seem to have been made to bring passages in different Gospels into harmony or to make a doctrinal point clearer.

What are some examples of differences between the Greek texts which show up in our English Bibles? One example is the Lord's Prayer as it is recorded in Matthew and in Luke. In the KJV the two versions are almost identical, while in the NIV the prayer in Luke 11 is significantly shorter than that in Matthew 6. Most scholars believe that, at some point in history, a scribe added to the text in Luke to make it agree more with Matthew.

The last half of Mark 16 is a lengthy section which is disputed. The KJV retains verses 9 through 20 while the NIV includes the passage with a note saying it is not found in the

most reliable early manuscripts. Scholars who believe it should be excluded also note that the style and vocabulary are very different from the rest of Mark.(9)

To add one more, in the KJV, three verses in Mark 9 (44 ,46, and 48) are identical: "Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." The NIV puts verses 44 and 46 in footnotes and notes that *some* manuscripts include the phrase. Since each verse follows a reference to hell, it is very possible that a scribe simply repeated the warning to strengthen the message.

If all this makes you nervous about the accuracy of your Bible, it is important to note that textual criticism is used on all documents for which the originals no longer exist. New Testament scholar J. Harold Greenlee noted that, with respect to the Bible, "No Christian doctrine . . . hangs upon a debatable text."(10) This conflict provides no fodder for critics of Christianity who might ask how we can know what the Bible really says. We can be confident that we have a highly accurate text, especially given the number of New Testament manuscripts available and the antiquity of some of them.(11) As one writer has said, "It is well to remember that the main body of the text and its general sense are left untouched . . . textual criticism engages in turning a magnifying glass upon some of the details."(12)

Other Issues in the Debate

In addition to the question of textual criticism, questions regarding the number of manuscripts, the historical dominance of the Byzantine text, and the dates of the manuscripts still need to be considered.

First is the matter of the *number* of manuscripts. Between eighty and ninety percent of existing manuscripts are of the Byzantine family and are in remarkable agreement. This fact is not in dispute. King James supporters say that the few

manuscripts to which Westcott and Hort gave preference cannot override the witness of the vast majority of manuscripts in existence which are of the Byzantine tradition. It is normal to expect that the oldest manuscript will have the most copies.(13) In response, those who follow Westcott and Hort point out that hundreds of copies could have been made from one defective text while a better text was not copied as often. The copying of New Testament texts was not as carefully monitored as the copying of the Old Testament text by Jewish scholars. As we have seen, errors were made and changes were deliberately introduced. Simply finding a lot of manuscripts which are in agreement is not enough. To illustrate their point, they ask whether one would rather have one real \$100 bill or five counterfeits.

A second issue is the *preservation* of the text through history. Supporters of the Received Text ask why God's Spirit would allow the church to be under the authority of a defective text for almost 1500 years. Textual critics respond that this argument exaggerates the issue. They do not consider the Byzantine text to be a "'bad' or heretical text; it presents the same Christian message as the critical [or Westcott-Hort] text."(14) Again, there are no doctrinal differences between the Greek texts. Members of the Byzantine family are used along with members of other text families to determine what the true reading of a passage should be. The major text families are neither absolutely corrupt nor absolutely perfect. Text critics must use all the available resources to determine what the original documents said.

Finally, the *dates* of the manuscripts are important in this debate. Textual critics point out that church fathers before the fourth century "unambiguously cited every text-type except the Byzantine."(15) If the Byzantine text-type comes directly from the original writings, one would expect unambiguous quotations of it from the beginning. They also point out that there are no Byzantine manuscripts older than the fourth

century, whereas there *are* copies of other text families older than that.

In response to this, King James supporters note that the New Testament manuscripts began to be altered very soon after they were written. Eusebius, the ancient church historian, reported that heresies sprang up early after the turn of the second century, and proponents of these heresies sometimes altered Scripture to accord with their beliefs.(16) Thus, antiquity is not the crucial test. That there are no copies older than the fourth century can be explained by the fact that the material manuscripts were written on was fragile; it's reasonable to conclude that the early copies probably wore out through frequent handling.

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, those who support the King James/Received Text tradition emphasize the number of manuscripts, the church's history with the Byzantine text, and God's interest in preserving His Word, whereas those following Westcott and Hort say that the variants in the manuscripts – even between those in the Byzantine family – prove the need for the textual criticism of the New Testament. The results of their analysis along with the ages of the manuscripts leads them to believe that the Byzantine family is just one text family that can lead us back to the originals – or close to it – but it is not the one best text family.

So, which way should you go on this debate? If you are concerned about the issue, I suggest that you study it more. The texts cited in the notes will give you a place to start. If not, I would recommend using a version that is as close to the Greek text as possible while being understandable to you. But whichever version you choose, be very sure of your arguments before insisting that others use it, too. It seems to me that, with all the difficulties we face in our often hostile culture, we should not erect walls between Christians

on the basis of Bible versions. We are not taking God's Word lightly here. We are simply calling for a more well-reasoned discussion and for the rule of love to govern the debate.

Notes

1. *Marketplace*, Christian Booksellers Association, May, 1998.
2. An example is the pamphlet by J. J. Ray, *The Eye Opener* (Junction City, Oregon, 1953).
3. D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* 3d ed., (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1963), 185.
6. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 61-62.
7. To be more precise, while Westcott and Hort gave the greater weight to the Alexandrian text over the Byzantine, they gave even greater weight to the manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus which they considered to be "neutral texts." Later, sympathetic scholars grouped these two with the Alexandrian family. See Carson, 41.
8. Edward F. Hills, "The Magnificent Burgon," in *Which Bible?*, 5th ed., David Otis Fuller, ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 101-105.
9. Greenlee, 133.
10. *Ibid.*, 68.
11. In addition to the Greek manuscripts, also available for study are ancient lectionaries, various translations into other languages, and the writings of the early church fathers. See Greenlee, pp. 44-58.
12. *Ibid.*, 17.
13. Zane C. Hodges, "The Greek Text of the King James Version," in *Which Bible?*, 37.
14. Greenlee, 81.
15. Carson, 47.

16. Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 215-216. See also Benjamin G. Wilkinson, "Our Authorized Bible Vindicated," in *Which Bible?*, 190-193.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation

A paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ's resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises 9 problems with the ad and answers them.

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



The title used above was the headline of a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper from a major university. Allegedly written by a university student named "Daniel," the ad appeared as a result of Resurrection Week on that campus in the spring of 1997.

I received a copy of the ad in a letter from a long-time friend of my son. He was angry, confused, and scared by the article. He opened his letter by saying, "This is one of the most upsetting articles that I have ever read. This paid advertisement' has contradicted everything that I believe in. It makes a mockery out of the way I have chosen to pattern my life. It even frightens me."

In this essay we are going to address the misleading statements and half-truths found in the article. A few days after receiving this correspondence, I took the article and broke it down into nine significant errors or issues raised by the author. My procedure will be quote each half-truth or

misleading statement, then address it.

I do not presume that this brief treatment will completely answer all of the objections raised by the “paid advertisement,” but these thoughts were a great help to my son’s friend as he took a deeper look at his faith. I trust that they will be equally helpful to you.

Christian Scholars and the Bible

Problem #1

“Have you ever wondered why so many biblical experts are so skeptical about Jesus’ resurrection’ and why even a growing number of Christian scholars and theologians are heard saying that his resurrection is not so central to Christianity” (“Cruci-fiction”).

It appears that Daniel is only interested in going to those “biblical experts” and “Christian scholars” that support his position. It is no secret that there are a number of Christian scholars who hold a low view of the Bible and the deity of Christ, i.e., they do not believe in the veracity or trustworthiness of the Scriptures or the deity of Christ.

They very often question not only the deity of Christ and His resurrection, but also the Trinity, His uniqueness as a Savior, and His second coming. They also tend to discount hell as a place for eternal damnation and consider sin as only a mistake. They see guilt as being of no consequence because it is imposed on humanity by those who would enforce a strict moral code of conduct.

Daniel’s comment about Christian scholars and theologians not considering the resurrection of Jesus being of any real importance is a ridiculous notion that denigrates the uniqueness of Jesus and ultimately places Him on the same plane as Buddha, Krishna, or any other “holy man” in history. Jesus is totally unique and that distinct difference is based

on His resurrection in bodily form. Without the Resurrection, there is no salvation for we are still in our sin.

Next, we will look at Daniel's assumption that there were tens and possibly hundreds of "gospels" in existence at the time the church selectively chose the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a basis for understanding God's truth, along with his assertion that the Apostle Paul fabricated these writings to alter the truth.

Numerous Gospels

Problem #2

Now we are going to look at the question of the canon: just where did the Bible come from and how can we know that it is trustworthy?

Our antagonist, Daniel, continues by making this statement:

"Since preachers have often failed to inform the people of what really happened in events surrounding the so called resurrection,' I will make an attempt to give the most possible accurate picture. Our information source will be the four surviving gospels even though they have been carefully selected by the Church from a pool of a multitude of gospels' tens, possibly hundreds. . . . The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" ("Cruci-fiction").

There is no doubt that there were a number of "gospels" circulating during and after the first century. But, Daniel's problem is that he does not have an understanding of how the Bible was canonized. There were several ways various writings were judged to be authentic. If they failed in any one area, they were suspect overall.

First, for a gospel or other book to be considered authentic by the early church, the author must have been an Apostle, one

who had been with Jesus during His ministry.

Remember that Jesus promised His disciples the Holy Spirit would enable them to remember His teachings so that they could communicate them accurately to others. He said to the Apostles, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 16:25-26). Jesus, who is absolutely reliable, believed that what the disciples wrote about Him would be just as true as if He wrote it Himself. That means that it would be historically accurate.

Second, the book had to be authoritative. Did it come from the hand of God? The previous passage indicates that a genuine message from God would come through the Holy Spirit.

Third, is it prophetic? Was it written by a man of God?

Fourth, is it authentic? When in doubt about a manuscript, the Church fathers threw it out.

Fifth, is it dynamic? Did it contain the life-transforming power of God?

Sixth, was the book received and used by the people and considered to be authentic and authoritative?

Daniel uses Irenaeus as a source for the idea of tens, even hundreds, of possible gospels circulating in the first century and subtly implies that he (Irenaeus) questioned their authenticity out of hand. However, we know that Irenaeus, according to historical documentation, gave credence to the four Gospels of the Bible.

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had been a Christian for eighty-six years, and was a disciple of John the Apostle. Irenaeus wrote the following regarding the four Gospels of the New Testament:

So firm is the ground upon which the Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these (documents), each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine. For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit (Against Heresies III).

It seems as if Irenaeus would probably differ with Daniel on this count.

The latter part of Daniel's statement, "The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" holds no water as well.

Daniel makes it seem that Paul was the official editor of the New Testament and that nothing made the canon unless he approved of its inclusion.

Daniel seems to overlook the fact that the books of the Bible were decided upon by Church Councils and not individuals. Plus, there is an overwhelming amount of manuscript evidence to help the inquiring student to recognize that there was no wholesale editing of the Gospels. (For more information on this, see the Probe article [Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](#))

Remember these manuscripts were being used daily by the Church and those using the Scripture were contemporaries of Paul. If, in fact, he had edited or distorted the writings of the Apostles, he would have had his hand called (see Acts

17:10-11) and would have been ostracized. The fact is, it didn't happen.

Crucifixion and Prophecies

Problem #3 Next, our antagonist, Daniel, questions the fact that Jesus really died on the cross and makes this statement regarding the event.

"In order to speed up death of the crucified , he ordered the soldiers to break the legs of both criminals, but not those of Jesus" ("Cruci-fiction").

It appears that Daniel is not familiar with prophecy and, in particular, those prophecies relating to Jesus' death. Psalms 34:20 says, "He keeps all his bones; Not one of them is broken." The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in John 19:33 where it is said, "But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs."

The Romans were not novices when it came to crucifixion and death. They knew a dead person when they saw one. It seems that Daniel cannot accept this possibility.

Problem #4

"But one soldier thrust a lance into his side. How can one see that a person is dead without a careful close inspection of signs of life as heartbeat and breathing? How many times are people pulled from water, fires, car wrecks who appear to be dead, but then are resurrected?' And if the soldier saw that Jesus was dead, why the lancing? No reason for it.

"Moreover, Romans never lanced the crucified. If the soldier did not get special orders from Pilate and if he was only a bit suspicious that Jesus was alive (as he had all reasons to be), he would have broken Jesus' legs like anyone else's, no

preferential treatment. It seems that the lancing (was) observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness ("Crucifixion").

Once again Daniel is allowing his bias to overtake his lack of understanding of the prophecies surrounding the Crucifixion

Zechariah 12:10 says, "They will look on me whom they have pierced."

John 19:34 offers the fulfillment of this prophecy. It reads, "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear."

Daniel is caught up with the notion that Jesus did not die on the cross, but seemed to have fainted and was resuscitated at a later time, thereby ignoring some basic facts regarding the death of Christ. There is no record that any of the onlookers questioned the fact of Jesus' death; also the centurion gave testimony of the death of Jesus to Pilate (Mark 15:44).

Furthermore, the piercing of His side confirmed that Jesus was indeed dead. But, equally important is the fact that from the wound came both blood and water. John 19:34 35 gives us an eyewitness account of the effect of the piercing. We read that blood and water poured from the wound, but had Jesus been alive at the time of the piercing, strong spurts of blood would have come forth with every heartbeat. Instead, we are told that a semi-dark red clot was seeping out and was separate from a flow of watery serum. These signs are evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries and, therefore, proof of death.

Problem #5

Next in our analysis of Christ's crucifixion, we are going to deal with several problems about which our antagonist, Daniel, attempts to create doubt. In doing so, we catch Daniel using poor logic to make his case against the Resurrection.

Daniel continues by observing that the lancing of Jesus was *“observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness which appears only in John’s gospel (and) was the author’s initiative to correct the previously written three gospels which did not document any such lancing”* (“Cruci-fiction”).

Each of the gospel writers had different interests: Matthew was a tax-collector; Mark was the son of Mary and close to the Apostles; Luke was a physician; and John was a fisherman. Each of these men likewise had a different perspective in their Gospel narrative. Luke, although he was a physician, wrote his Gospel as a historical account. John offers the reader no account of the birth of Jesus, His baptism, or His temptations; it tells us nothing of the Last Supper, nothing of Gethsemane, and nothing of the Ascension, to name just a few omissions.

However, if we are to use Daniel’s logic we would have to discount all these facts because they were not mentioned in all four Gospels that “survived the editing of Paul.”

Genealogies of Christ

Problem #6

“When Matthew and Luke were independently editing the earlier Mark’s gospel, they knew that its contemporary critics pointed out that the Messiah must come from David’s line and Mark did not mention Jesus’ genealogy. So each made up his own list of names” (“Cruci-fiction”).

Here, Daniel seems to be a bit lazy. Instead of doing a little research to gain an understanding of Jesus’ lineage, he simply makes the comment that each writer just made it up to suit his own wishes.

In Judaism a man’s lineage was his pedigree. It was a matter of high regard for a Jew to have direct lineage from Abraham, thereby proving his Jewishness. The Gospel writers had

different reasons for including Jesus' pedigree.

As Daniel points out, the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke are quite different. There are several possibilities for this occurrence.

Luke includes the genealogy between Adam and Abraham. The section between Abraham and David is the same in both Matthew and Luke. However, the genealogies between David and Joseph are almost completely different. Why is this?

One school of thought is that both genealogies are symbolic and that Matthew gives us the line of royal descent of Jesus and Luke gives us the line of priestly descent.

Another school of thought is that one genealogy (Matthew's) gives Christ's ancestral line from Abraham through Joseph (Jesus' legal father, though not His natural one) establishing Jesus' legal right to the throne of David. This fits the Jewishness of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part of this approach is that the genealogy in Luke traces Jesus' ancestry from Mary (Jesus' physical mother) back to Adam (physical father of the human race). (There are some minor concerns about the spelling of some names in this genealogy, but this seems to be the best answer.) It is also very compatible with the universal character of the book of Luke.

The fact is that we do not fully know which genealogical approach is more correct. However, we do know that genealogies were extremely important to the Jews and the idea of making them up is preposterous and would have been exposed.

Our next discussion will center on the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, but only swooned.

Burial of Christ

Problem #7

"Thus Jesus was taken off the cross after approximately three hours by Joseph of Arimathea and was buried on his property in his new tomb that he (Joseph) had hewn in the rock.' Why there? Why didn't Joseph bury Jesus in the ground as most people were buried, but instead he put him into his own tomb? Because in the ground Jesus would have certainly suffocated. Moreover, Joseph knew that he would be able to reuse the tomb in the future" ("Cruci-fiction").

It is true that the Romans normally buried those who were crucified in a pit unless the body was claimed. The body of Jesus was not claimed by a family member or by one of the disciples. They were evidently too scared and feared the possible outcome of doing so. It was Joseph of Arimathea who desired a more appropriate resting place for the body of the Lord.

Joseph realized that he had to move quickly in order to accomplish his goal of burial because the Sabbath was close. There was no time for elaborate preparations, and Joseph did what any other believer would have done he made his newly hewn sepulcher available to our Lord.

The tomb was in close proximity to Golgotha and spared Joseph and Nicodemus the trouble of preparing a burial site along with the need to prepare the body.

Problem #8

"What would you do in Joseph's place knowing Jesus had only been on the cross three hours and had not had his legs broken? Exactly what Joseph did. Once dark settled, he took several of his servants and unrolled the stone to get Jesus out. According to all expectations, Jesus was alive, so Joseph got him out and rolled the stone back. Only the next day did the Pharisees realize their mistake and asked Pilate to guard the tomb, by which time Jesus was resting in Joseph's house" ("Cruci-fiction").

On the surface this argument sounds plausible. However, it does not take into account the fact that Joseph fully believed and recognized that Jesus was indeed dead. If he were to follow through, as Daniel suggests, by removing the stone and taking Jesus to his home for recuperation, he would have been directly disobeying Jewish law.

Jewish law prohibited a Jew from working on the Sabbath. They had very strict ideas about what comprised work. It is highly unlikely that Joseph would have risked the penalty for breaking the Sabbath for removing a body that he believed was dead. For what purpose? To risk the penalty of death for breaking the Sabbath?

According to scholars, the stone that was placed at the entrance of the tomb was not only larger than what would normally be used, but one that would take twenty men to move. Beyond the above, if Joseph did return with twenty men to remove the stone and release Jesus, it would be most unlikely that it could have been kept secret. It is untenable to think that such a conspiracy would have succeeded.

Likewise, it is ludicrous to suggest that after the Roman guard was posted and the tomb sealed, that evidence of tampering—should someone be so foolhardy as to try it—would have escaped the notice of the highly trained Roman soldiers. They knew the penalty for failure was death.

Problem #9

“Next we are told that after Sabbath was over women came to the tomb. Why? To anoint the body with spices as Mark 16:1 says? No! It is not a Jewish custom to open graves and anoint corpses which have already been buried and which have been fermenting for two days!” (“Cruci-fiction”).

Here Daniel is correct. However he does not take into account the special circumstances under which Jesus was interred.

Under normal conditions a body would have been properly prepared with ample time in which to complete the task. Joseph and Nicodemus had very little time to accomplish their duty before the Sabbath restrictions were imposed. The women sitting at the preparation site saw that the process was incomplete according to their custom and subsequently desired to prepare the body in the proper way. Therefore, they made plans to return after the Sabbath and finish the process by anointing the body with sweet spices, nard, or some costly unguent.

Perhaps the most damaging piece of information to Daniel's hypothesis is the fact that the grave clothes were left undisturbed in the place where the body was laid. The body of Jesus was wrapped from the armpits to the ankles with strips of linen twelve inches wide. The linen wraps were then wound around the body placing spices, aloes, and other fine ointments between the wraps. It is believed that a minimum of seventy pounds of spices were used in the process and as much as a hundred pounds were used for someone of Jesus' position.

The grave clothes constituted quite a mass encasing the body. If we are to assume Daniel's position that Joseph and several of his servants took the body, we would expect that they were concerned about being detected. Therefore, they would have likely been in a great hurry, and we should expect that the grave clothes would have been left in great disarray with spices trailing out the doorway, not to mention that it would have been difficult to have placed the grave clothes neatly back on the resting place in the dark while being in a great hurry to do so.

However, the observers did not find spices and wrappings trailing out of the doorway. The grave clothes were intact, undisturbed with the exception of the head napkin that was placed slightly above where it should have been found.

John R. W. Stott in his book, *Basic Christianity*, makes this

observation: "The body had disappeared. It would have vaporized, being transmuted into something new and different and wonderful. It would have passed through the grave clothes, as it was later to pass through closed doors, leaving them untouched and almost undisturbed. For the body clothes, under the weight of one hundred pounds of spices, once support of the body had been removed, would have subsided or collapsed, and would now be lying flat."

The grave clothes represent an undeniable fact: Jesus was not bodily or physically removed from their bondage, but He was indeed raised, transmuted from them in the glorious act of the Resurrection.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

The Historical Christ

Introduction

Can we trust what our New Testaments tell us about Jesus? Or must we look elsewhere and possibly conclude that Jesus was just a man like all others whose teachings became the basis of a religion largely created by his followers?

Over the past fifteen years or so, New Testament scholars have been involved in what has been called the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. The television program "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians,"[{1}](#) which aired on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) stations April 7th and 8th, 1998, was intended to bring the public up-to-date with the latest "new and controversial historical evidence" about Jesus and the establishment of the church.

If you watched the program you might have been surprised by some of the things you heard. The narrator said that “archaeologists must sift clues and scholars decode the stories told by the first followers of Jesus” in order to find the truth. It was suggested that the differences between Mark’s and John’s reports about Jesus’ arrest is evidence that they aren’t historically accurate accounts. One participant said that the Gospel writers were only giving their own theology using Jesus as a spokesman.

For the scholars on “From Jesus to Christ,” Jesus was just a man who preached about the coming kingdom of God. He was not the incarnate Son of God. But he had enough charisma that he was able to gather about himself a group of people who were attracted to his ideas, and who sought to keep his memory and teachings alive after he died. As time went by, legends began to develop as words and actions were attributed to Jesus which weren’t really his. The new Christians needed Jesus to speak to their own difficulties, so they put words in his mouth or invented miracles to address whatever the difficulty was.

The views aired on “From Jesus to Christ” are widespread among mainline scholars, and they are the views typically heard on college campuses and in the media. Two assumptions are made about the life of Jesus, and they are considered such common knowledge that they typically aren’t defended. They are: first, that the Gospels aren’t reliable historical documents; and second, that there was no real supernatural element in Jesus’ life and ministry. In fact, the belief that Jesus really didn’t perform miracles or rise from the dead is part of the reason many scholars reject the Gospels as historical documents. One of the participants in the program, John Dominic Crossan, wrote in one of his books, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” [\[2\]](#) If one begins with anti-supernatural assumptions, that will affect how one reads historical accounts such as those in the New Testament.

The question of the historical reliability of the Gospels is critical, because Christianity rests upon historical events. If the possibility of having true knowledge of these is gone, we have nothing upon which to base our beliefs. Without the historical events, Christianity becomes just another set of beliefs.

Since the PBS program focused on historical issues, we'll concentrate our attention there and leave the matter of the supernatural for another time. But before making a case for the historicity of the Gospels, we should have some background information on the project of searching for the historical Jesus.

A Brief History of the Quest

The first indication that "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians" might not be presenting historically orthodox views of Jesus is the title of the program itself. The viewer might have thought that "From Jesus to Christ" referred to what Peter said in Acts 2:36: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified." The scholars on "From Jesus to Christ," however, weren't thinking of the position to which Jesus was exalted by God the Father; they were thinking about the position Jesus' *followers* gave him through the development of the Christian religion. In other words, Jesus the man from Nazareth was transformed *by his followers* to Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The result was a break between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

So, where did this idea come from?

In the last century and a half there have been three so-called "quests" for the historical Jesus. The first quest began in the 19th century when David Strauss published a book titled *The Life of Jesus*. Believing "that the Gospels could no longer be read straightforwardly as unvarnished historical records of

what Jesus actually said and did,"[{3}](#) Strauss said that "unbiased historical research" needed to be done to find out who Jesus really was. Why did Strauss think we could no longer accept the Gospel narratives at face value? As philosopher Stephen Evans says, "The quick answer is simply 'modernity.'" In the era of the Enlightenment, optimism about the power of human reason quickly led to the renunciation of the supernatural, so that reports of miracles and resurrections were now to be considered pre-scientific and mythological.[{4}](#) Since so much of the Gospels deals with the supernatural, the documents were no longer to be trusted historically.

In the 1940s a second quest began with students of German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. According to Bultmann, very little could be known about the historical Jesus, not much more than that he lived and died on a cross. Some of his students began a new effort to find the historical Jesus. This second quest continued until the early 70s.[{5}](#)

In the early 80s the Third Quest for the historical Jesus began with the rise of a new enthusiasm about the prospects of historical study.[{6}](#) New archaeological and manuscript data have greatly increased our knowledge of Jesus' world. This quest seeks to know who Jesus was by understanding the world in which he lived.

These three quests have been based upon the idea that the Gospels are deficient in giving us a true picture of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, it's tempting to just brush all this aside as liberal balderdash, but we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some good information is coming out of current studies.[{7}](#) However, not everything is to be accepted simply on the academic merits of participating scholars. In fact, the work of the Jesus Seminar, a splinter group that was represented in the program by at least three of the scholars, has drawn conclusions that even most liberal scholars reject. What we need to do is to look at the arguments presented and see if they hold water historically.

What follows, then, is a brief defense of the historical reliability of the Gospels.

Dating the Gospels

The assumption in “From Jesus to Christ” that the Gospels are not historically reliable records was very clear. Historian Paula Fredriksen said, “What [the Gospels] do is proclaim their individual author’s interpretation of the Christian message through the device of using Jesus of Nazareth as a spokesperson for the evangelist’s position” (FJTC, Pt. 2). Thus, these documents aren’t to be taken literally as historically true. There are at least three reasons many scholars believe this: a late date for writing; biased writers; and differences between the Gospels. Let’s look first at the question of dating.

Mainline New Testament scholars believe that the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—were written after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in A.D. 70. Mark was written first, drawing on earlier written and oral traditions. Matthew and Luke drew from Mark and still other traditions. Even conservative scholars recognize an interdependency in the Synoptics. The crucial issue here is *when* the documents were written. A late date would give more time for legends to develop. Late dates for the Synoptics would also suggest that they weren’t really written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

However, although the dates aren’t firmly established, good arguments have been given for earlier dating which would strengthen the case for the historicity of the Gospels.

Craig Blomberg, a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, provides several arguments for early dates. For one thing, the early church fathers said that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written by the biblical characters we’re familiar with. “No competing traditions assigning these books to any other authors have survived,” he says, “if any ever

existed.”[{8}](#) For example, in the late second century, one of the church fathers said Matthew composed his gospel before Paul was martyred under Nero in the 60s A.D. Blomberg wonders why the early believers would have attributed these writings to such unlikely candidates as Matthew, Mark and Luke if they were written by others. Mark and Luke weren’t apostles. And Matthew didn’t have an especially good reputation. “The apocryphal Gospels,” Blomberg continues, “consistently picked more well-known and exemplary figures for their fictitious authors—for example, Philip, Peter, James, Bartholomew or Mary.”[{9}](#)

Another argument Blomberg presents is built upon the date of the book of Acts. Acts ends abruptly with no record of what happened to Paul. Why would Luke have left out that important information if he wrote the book a decade or more after Paul’s death? And why would he make no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? The likely explanation for the abrupt ending of Acts is that it was written as the events unfolded—in other words, while Paul was still alive (Paul died in the mid-60s). If so, then Luke’s Gospel—as the first part of his two-part history—must have been written earlier. Since Luke drew from Mark, Mark must have been written earlier still.

A case can be made, then, that the Synoptic Gospels were written within about 30 years of Jesus’ death. This puts them close enough to the events that the facts they report could be corrected if wrong.[{10}](#)

The Gospel Writers and Historical Truth

Assuming that we have presented a plausible argument for early dates for the Synoptics, this still leaves unanswered the question whether the writers *intended* to write factual history.

On the program, Prof. Dominic Crossan suggested that we are

mistaken in taking the Gospels factually because the writers didn't intend us to do so. He says that the issue "is whether the people who told us the stories in the ancient world took them all literally, and now we're so smart that we know to take them symbolically, or they all intended them symbolically and we're so dumb that we've been taking them literally." Crossan takes the second option. He says, "I think we have been misinterpreting these stories because the people who write [sic] them don't seem the least bit worried about their diversity. We see the problem and then we want to insist that they're literal. I think that we have misread the Scriptures, not that they have miswritten them" (FJTC, Pt. 2).

Thus, it is thought that Matthew inflated the importance of the Pharisees in his Gospel because they were so influential later in the first century when the book was written. Mark, they say, presented Jesus as the persecuted one because Mark's community was suffering. And Luke embellished his narrative with "shipwrecks and exotic animals and exotic vegetation" (FJTC, Pt. 2) to make it more in keeping with the novelistic literature of his time.

While it's surely true that each writer chose the events and sayings of Jesus that he thought were significant and which would be meaningful to his audience, this doesn't mean the stories were made up.

Craig Blomberg offers some help here. First, he points to the opening statement in Luke's Gospel where Luke declared his intent to "write an orderly account" of the things he had "carefully investigated . . . from the beginning" (Lu. 1:1-4).[\[11\]](#) Luke wanted to convey the truth.

But were Luke's sources *themselves* concerned with accurately passing on what Jesus said and did? Some believe that, since the church thought Jesus was returning soon, they wouldn't worry about accurate reporting. But first, it isn't certain that Jesus' followers thought he would return right away. And

second, the Israelites before them had kept accurate records of the things prophets said, even though they were expecting at any time the coming Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1; Obad. 15; Hab. 2:3). The words of Jesus, who was considered greater than a prophet, would have held even greater value to early believers. They had a good reason for accurately remembering and reporting.

Prof. Blomberg also says that if the Gospel writers devised the words and works of Jesus to suit the needs of the early church, one might expect that they would have addressed the controversies that arose after Jesus ascended to heaven. The writers could have put in Jesus' mouth answers to these issues. But this didn't happen. Jesus didn't answer the controversy over circumcision; he didn't say whether Christians could divorce non-Christian spouses; he didn't settle the matter of speaking in tongues. It seems that "the first Christians were interested in preserving the distinction between what happened during Jesus' life and what was debated later in the churches."

Thus, contrary to what Prof. Crossan said, we are not "dumb" to believe the Gospel writers intended to give us factual history.

Differences Between the Gospels

A crucial piece of evidence for the view taken by the scholars of "From Jesus to Christ" is that of the differences between what the Gospel writers report. The sequence of some events, and some of the things Jesus said, are recorded differently. This is said to indicate that the Gospels aren't accurate historical documents.

Dominic Crossan gives as an example the accounts in Mark and John of the night before Jesus' death. Mark has Jesus in agony over his coming death, while John shows a more victorious Jesus standing up against the troops which came to arrest him.

Crossan concludes, “You have a Jesus out of control, almost, in Mark; a Jesus totally in control in John. . . . Neither of them are historical,” he says. “I don’t think either of them know [sic] exactly what happened” (FJTC, Pt. 2). Prof. Crossan didn’t mention the possibility that, while both writers told the truth, they only told part of the truth. The events recorded in the four Gospels can be put together to form a coherent account of what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane. [{12}](#)

Blomberg argues that the Gospel writers were capable of remembering what Jesus said and did, but they weren’t concerned to record it all word for word.

On the one hand, the written word was at a premium in the ancient world, so oral transmission was the primary means of passing on knowledge. Thus, people learned to memorize a great deal of information. To illustrate, Blomberg notes that rote memorization was the method of education for Jewish boys, and rabbis were encouraged to memorize the entire Old Testament. [{13}](#)

On the other hand, as another conservative New Testament scholar, Darrell Bock, points out, the tradition for reporting history in the Greco-Roman world involved a “concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not remembered or recorded.” Ancient historians didn’t take it upon themselves to simply make up speeches and put them in others’ mouths. [{14}](#) They saw it as their duty to record what really happened or was said. As Craig Blomberg says, certain details could be omitted and the sequence of events could be changed “*so long as the major events of the narratives and their significance were not altered*” (italics his). [{15}](#)

This shouldn’t be alarming for those of us who accept the Gospels as God’s inspired Word. Even in our own experience we don’t, for example, question the word of an attentive and

trustworthy person who summarizes a speech he heard. Likewise, if I tell you that our *Mind Games* director asked me today to participate in an upcoming conference, I'm telling you the truth of what he said, even if I'm not quoting him verbatim. We can't avoid the fact that Jesus' words and deeds are reported differently in the Gospels. Understanding the method of ancient historians, however, assures us that we have been given the truth about Jesus. Accepting Paul's testimony that "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16) assures us that the Gospel writers gave us the truth exactly as God wanted it presented.

We have attempted in this essay to show that the Gospel writers *could* have written historical truth because they wrote soon enough after the events to insure against legend; that they *intended* to report what really happened; and that the *differences between the Gospels* do not make for a valid case against their historical truthfulness. There is no reason, then, short of theological bias, to reject what is in the Gospels, and instead search for the real historical Jesus elsewhere.

While those involved in the program "From Jesus to Christ" have benefited the church by their archeological finds and new information about the world in which Jesus lived, they have erred in rejecting the clear message of Jesus in the Gospels. The Christ of faith *is* the Jesus of history.

Notes

1. "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians," April 7 (Part 1) and April 8 (Part 2), 1998, PBS (hereafter cited in text as FJTC). Transcript obtained from PBS web site: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>.
2. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 95.

3. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 9.

4. C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 13.

5. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. Darrell L. Bock, New Testament professor, Dallas Theological Seminary. Telephone conversation with the author, April 15, 1998.

8. Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 28.

9. *Ibid.*, 28-29.

10. *Ibid.*, 29.

11. *Ibid.*, 30. Material for the remainder of this section was drawn from Blomberg, 30-32.

12. See for example A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 201-208.

14. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 79.

15. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start?" 32.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Learning About God

The God Who Would Be Known

Recently my wife and I took a few hours off to visit a local nature preserve. You know how quiet and peaceful that can be. Imagine you're out there in nature enjoying your walk, and talking with . . . God. That's what Adam and Eve did, wasn't it?

We don't walk and talk with God the same way Adam and Eve did, but the God of the universe Who holds our very existence in His hand wants to show Himself to us as well; He wants us to know Him. He not only wants us to *know* Him, though; He wants us to know *about* Him.

Sometimes Christians will say they don't need a lot of doctrine; they just want to know God personally, to just *experience* Him, without complicating things by adding all that theological gobbledy-gook. With a little bit of reflection, however, one can see how important knowing *about* God is to *knowing* God.

If my wife were to try to talk to me about her interests or desires or anything about herself, and I were to say, "You know, dear, I hate to get confused with all that information. I just want to *experience* your presence; I just want to *relate* to you personally," you might understand if she experienced some confusion! What does it mean to "know" someone in our experience without knowing things *about* the person? The most it could mean is that I just want the feelings that come with being near someone I love.

My own joy in her presence, however, rests on certain knowledge about her. How much joy would any of us experience in the presence of, say, a known axe-murderer?! It's amazing what a little knowledge can do for one's "experience!"

Resisting any knowledge about my wife would also indicate that I don't really have much interest in her; I'm only concerned with *myself* and *my* experience. What greater way is there to let someone know you really care and are interested than to want to learn about him or her?

Have I convinced you of the need to know *about* God in order to truly *know* God? If so, I hope you'll invest some time in studying theology. You needn't read a massive work on systematic theology. A writer whose work I'm benefiting from is Alister McGrath. He's a well-respected theologian who makes theology accessible for the layperson. R.C. Sproul and J. I. Packer are two others from whose writings you would benefit. In fact, Packer's popular book, *Knowing God*, would be a great place to start.

You might still be hesitant because you know that it's possible to substitute the "knowing about" for the "knowing personally." How can we let what we know about God feed our personal knowledge of Him? Listen to this suggestion from J. I. Packer: "The rule for doing this is demanding but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God." [\(1\)](#)

In this essay we'll just touch on a few subjects of importance in knowing about God: revelation; the Trinity; God's sovereignty; and idolatry. I hope this will be helpful to you as you continue the wonderful journey of knowing God.

The God Who Can Be Known

In a debate on the existence of God between Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland and atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen, Nielsen argued that, for the educated person, "it is irrational to believe in God." [\(2\)](#) Why? Because there is nothing in our experience to refer to when we say "God" that gives meaning to the word. If we want to argue, for example,

that a certain table exists, we can point to the table or we can describe it in terms we understand. Since we can't point to God and we can't understand what God is in Himself, we can't talk about Him meaningfully, Nielsen says.

So, where does this leave Christians? Does it leave us with an irrational faith? *Can* we know about God? If so, *how* so?

We are able to know God because of revelation. *Revelation* means "disclosure." As New Testament scholar Leon Morris says, "Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover." [\(3\)](#) The last book of the Bible is called *Revelation* because it reveals the plans of God which were otherwise unknowable.

Revelation is necessary because of the nature of God. He can't be seen by us (Jn. 1:18; I Tim. 6:16; I Jn. 4:12); we can't know his depths or His limits, Zophar told Job (Job 11:7; cf. Rom. 11:33); and no one knows His thoughts except the Spirit (I Cor. 2:11). Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Mt. 11:27). Thus, if God and His ways are to be known, they must be revealed by Him to us. As Deut. 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever. . ."

How has God revealed Himself to us? Rom. 1:20 says that we know God exists through what He has made (i.e., nature). We see the hand of God in the historical events recorded in the Old Testament, such as the Exodus and the establishment of Israel and the regathering of God's people under Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ps. 9:16; 77:14; Eze. 20:9). Our own conscience bears witness through a knowledge of moral law (Rom. 2:15). God has made Himself known specially through Jesus and through the written Word of God (Jn. 15:15; Mt. 11:27). Recall Heb.

1:1,2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son."

Through revelation we know of God's glory (Is. 40:5), His righteousness (Is. 56:1), and His righteous judgment (Rom. 2:5). We know his plans (cf. Dan. 2:28,29; Eph. 3:3-6) and what He desires of us (cf. Micah 6:8). Even the message of the Gospel is referred to as a mystery now made known (Mt. 13:35; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:3-6).

If atheists like Prof. Nielsen refuse to acknowledge the reality of God, that doesn't negate what we know to be true. *Our* belief in God doesn't depend upon the confirmation of others. Besides, God has made Himself known in a tangible way in Jesus as well as in nature, history, conscience and Scripture. At the day of judgment, those who rely upon the excuse "Not enough evidence!" will be in for an awful surprise. God has revealed Himself, and we can know Him.

The Trinity

There's probably no more baffling doctrine taught in Scripture than that of the Trinity. Christians say that God is three in one. How can that be? How can there be one God, and yet we name three persons— Father, Son, and Spirit—as God?

Attempts have been made to find some comparison in our own experience that can make this truth understandable, but they all fail at some point. Some say the Trinity might be like steam, water and ice—three forms which H₂O takes. But this analogy fails because the same quantity of H₂O doesn't assume all three forms at one time. The analogy of an egg also fails because the three components—yolk, white and shell—are completely different. God isn't three separate parts in one unit. The Bible teaches that there is only one God, and that He is unified in His being. It also teaches that there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, distinct from one

another, all existing at the same time. One being, three persons. A mystery, for sure, but not a contradiction.

Theologian Alister McGrath offers a helpful illustration. If a scientist takes a sample of air for some kind of testing, he has real *air* in his sample but not *all* of the air. He just has a sample, but he expects that what can be found in the rest of the air can be found in the sample; they are identical in nature. As McGrath says, “Jesus allows us to sample God.”[\(4\)](#) When people saw Jesus, they saw God. This is a better illustration, but it still isn’t perfect.

Is this doctrine important? As McGrath notes, it is the foundational reality underlying our belief that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (II Cor. 5:19). God could reach out to us effectively because He reached out Himself. It was God in Christ who acted on our behalf; it wasn’t some mere human emissary who brought us a good word from God. And it is the Holy Spirit—God again—who continues to minister in us while we wait for the glory which is to come.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn’t only a difficulty for Christians: it’s also a favorite target of critics who seek to undermine our faith by finding flaws in it. Apart from the logical question of how one God can be three persons, critics also point to the fact that it was centuries after Christ that the doctrine was formulated. They say it was an invention of the church.

It shouldn’t seem surprising that there was a delay in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. As noted earlier, it’s the theological explanation of the teaching that was present from the beginning, that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” As the church came under attack and as Christians thought through scriptural teaching, they gradually developed fuller and more sophisticated doctrines. They weren’t making up new beliefs; they were more fully explaining what they already believed.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a necessary component of Christian belief. Any description of God which doesn't include all that this doctrine includes is inadequate. Far from being theologically burdensome, the doctrine of the Trinity is an essential part of Christianity.

The Sovereignty of God

Along with the doctrine of the Trinity, an issue that is equally baffling is that of God's sovereignty and man's free will. The Bible indicates that God is fully in control of this universe, yet it also makes clear that we have real freedom. Our decisions are significant. Our prayers, for example, do make a difference. How can we be free and our actions be meaningful while God determines the course of history?

In recent years a view of God called the "open view" has gained a hearing among evangelicals. According to this view, "God does not control everything that happens."[\(5\)](#) God often changes His plans to meet the changing situation brought about by our decisions and actions. As one writer says, "God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; . . . history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do."[\(6\)](#) Among other things, this means that God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future; He is learning as we are.[\(7\)](#)

What do we learn from Scripture about this subject? First, we learn that God is unchanging in His being and perfections or attributes. In Malachi 3:6 God says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." James tells us that in God "there is no variation or shifting shadow." (Jam. 1:17)

Second, we learn that God is unchanging in His purposes. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation," says Ps. 33:11. In Is. 46:9-11 God says clearly that what He has planned from long ago He

will bring about.

Third, we learn that God knows the future already. Is. 46:10 says He “[declares] the end from the beginning.”

While acknowledging God’s control of history leading to His own ends, we must also acknowledge that He does respond to our actions and petitions. In Gen. 6 we read that God was “grieved in His heart” that He had made man, so He acted to wipe out everyone except Noah and his family. In Numbers 14 we read of a time when God said He would wipe out the Israelites, but He relented after Moses interceded for the people.

What are we to make of this? As writer Mark Hanna has noted, we tend to make adjustments in our theology to compensate for this tension between God’s sovereignty and our free will. To do this, however, only creates problems elsewhere in our theology. What we must do is leave the tension where the Bible does. [\(8\)](#)

Why is the reality of God’s sovereign control important? It’s because God is unchanging in His being that we can trust Him to be “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). It’s because God has knowledge of the future which is settled that predictive prophecy is possible. It’s because God knows in advance what people will do that he isn’t blind-sided by evil. Thus we can trust Him to know what is ahead of us; our future is ultimately in His hands, not the hands of people.

Although some people have theological problems with this, for others the problem might be personal. In other words, maybe we just don’t like the idea that anyone else—even God—has ultimate control over us. For those who are truly and joyfully submitted to God, however, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and complete foreknowledge is a source of comfort, not of annoyance.

A Jealous God

In Isaiah 44 we read about a man who makes an idol from a tree. Part of the tree he worships; he calls on it to deliver him. The other part he burns for cooking and for warming himself. Isaiah 44:19 shows the ridiculousness of what he is doing with these words:

No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!"

Idolatry is setting something up in place of God. Paul sums it up in one simple phrase: "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25). Those things to which we devote ourselves and which end up ruling our lives, thus taking precedence over God, become our idols.

Writer Richard Keyes speaks of nearby idols which give us a sense of control over our lives, things as ordinary as a clean house or even a stamp collection. Keyes also speaks about faraway idols, those things that give a sense of meaning to our lives such as financial security or progress in science. Nearby idols give us an immediate sense of security; they're substitutes for the immanent activity of God in our lives. Faraway idols give us a sense of purpose and meaning; in them we put our hope. They are substitutes for the transcendent rule of God over our world. [\(9\)](#)

In response to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, God often revealed Himself to be a jealous God. "They have made Me jealous with what is not God," He said. "They have provoked Me to anger with their idols" (Deut. 32:21). Why would God respond this way? Because first, God deserves all glory, for

all good things come from Him (Jam. 1:17). And second, because created things can't do what God can and wants to do for us. In Is. 42 we read: "Thus says God the Lord, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. . . . 'I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.'" (42:5-8). He is the creator and life-giver. There is no one and nothing like Him.

In contrast to this, idols are created, they aren't eternal, and they are incapable of providing what we really need. Theologian Carl Henry brings to mind Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al when he refers to idols as "the false gods who never show." [\(10\)](#) Ba'al couldn't respond to his prophets no matter how much they shouted and danced and prayed (I Ki. 18:17-40). As the psalm writer said, "They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see" (115:5). The problem is that idols by nature are not gods at all (Jer. 2:11; 5:7; Acts 19:26; Gal. 4:8). Thus it is that when such things as money or power or athletic prowess become our idols, we find that they cannot deliver us from everything that would destroy us.

We began this essay talking about the God Who would be known. To set up an idol in His place is to reject what He has told us about Himself and His desires. Today there are many other gods which call for our allegiance. We must continually recommit ourselves to the One Who won't share His glory with others.

Notes

1. James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 18.
2. J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 48.
3. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:

Eerdmans, 1976), 10.

4. Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 205.

5. Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.

6. Ibid., 15.

7. Ibid., 16.

8. Mark Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 59-60.

9. Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," in *No God But God: Breaking With the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 37-48.

10. Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1966), 5.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Why A Moral Life Won't Get Us to Heaven

Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?' The answer is no, and Probe's Jimmy Williams spells out why, including how we CAN get to heaven.

Man: The Worshiping Animal

This essay is concerned with the often-asked question, "Won't a good, moral life get me to heaven?"

We begin first with the nature of man himself. One of the most remarkable things about humans is that from the dawn of history, and no matter where we find them on this planet, they

are *worshipping* animals. In fact, humans are the *only* animals in the world who worship. *Homo Sapiens* is incurably religious. Why is man so inclined? What are the reasons, and how do they bear on our question about having good morals and getting to heaven?

Let's look briefly at some foundational elements that appear to be universals when it comes to human behavior. The first, as we stated above, is simply that humans *do* worship. Ethnic groups of all kinds and in all places, whether remote or close to other peoples, have their own history, folklore, deities, rituals, particular moral system and life-customs. All of these enable each culture to cope with the great issues of life and its passages—from childhood to maturity to old age, and to the ultimate passage through that dark gate, Death. Christians tie this human inclination to worship directly to the fact that God says man, and only man, is created in His divine image (*imago dei*).

Secondly, what is also curious is *how* and *what* humans worship. The most prominent feature of human worship from earliest beginnings has been a *sacrifice* of some sort, whether the sheep, goats or bulls of the early Mediterranean world, or the human beings hurled into the mouths of volcanos by the Polynesians, or the child sacrifices of the Canaanites, or the ritual slaughter practiced by the Aztecs, the Incas, and virtually all of the New World Indians. In all cases, it appears some kind of blood must flow. We can also add to this (in many cultures) the prominence of *self-sacrifice* through flagellation, severe asceticism, or acts of personal penance.

The centrality of sacrifice in all human religious thinking points to an unmistakable reality: that humans instinctively know, or at least suspect, that there exists One to whom they are accountable for their behavior. They also assume, or know, that they have fallen short of what that higher being (or beings) requires of them. There is a universal sense that "God is not pleased with me." So a third feature of worship is

universal *guilt*. People worship because they feel guilty. They feel this guilt because they perceive they have fallen short of the standard that God, others, and they themselves require.

The Great Global Heresy: Religion

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys go to hell!” Probably most of us, at one time or another, have undergone the ordeal of having a parent or a teacher point a finger at us (or a neighboring miscreant) and warn of the ultimate outcome of unacceptable behavior.

This “Santa Claus” mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.”

Everywhere we turn, we hear people speak of this religion: it is the most popular approach to God on the planet. We all know about the good little angel sitting on one shoulder and the bad little angel on the other. And we are very familiar with jokes about what happens to the person who dies and is immediately face to face with Saint Peter at the Golden Gates of Heaven. Peter stands there ready to evaluate and pass judgement on whether we’ve been good enough to be admitted and accepted inside. Saint Peter expects us to give moral account of ourselves before we can go inside.

The general, world-wide assumption is that, when we die, our good deeds and our bad deeds will be placed on the divine scales and weighed to determine if we go “up” or “down.” However, from Christianity’s viewpoint, this is a great, global heresy.

This is “religion,” but it is definitely not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is radically opposed to such an idea, teaching us that we are not to *do* something, but rather that something has already been *done* on our behalf. This global heresy, which we call “religion,” actually comes from

Hinduism. It is the idea that God resides at the top of a great mountain, and it makes little difference which path a seeker chooses in his ascent up that mountain, since all paths lead to the God on top. And it is up to you to climb if you want to reach the summit—and God.

At the western end of the Forum in ancient Rome, there stood the *Millenarium Aureum*, the Golden Milestone, a gilded bronze column set up by Augustus Caesar to mark the junction and the origin of the major Roman roads spreading out like the spokes of a great wheel in every direction to distant destinations throughout the Empire. On this column were inscribed the major towns and their distances from Rome. From this came the popular saying, “All roads lead to Rome.”

This is what religionists believe about God. They say things like, “Well, it really doesn’t matter what you believe. What’s important is that you try to do your best and be sincere about it. After all, we’re all trying to get to the same place; we all worship the same God.”

But in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, we encounter something very different: in fact, we discover that there are *two* possible approaches to God, but only *one* is acceptable. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they immediately hid in the bushes, took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves.

God came and found them in the bushes—flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the clusters of fig leaves they had hastily sewn together, and He was not pleased. In fact, He scolded their efforts and their conduct. Adam and Eve not only had to admit their guilt and disobedience, they also had to acknowledge their inability to make things right *through their own efforts*. They could not cover, or atone, for what they had done. The account goes on to say that God had to take the initiative to adequately clothe them. He killed some animals and made garments from

their skins for a covering.

All philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, and all other systems which seek to gain the approval of God through human self-effort are the "fig-leaf" approach. This method is at the heart of what we call "religion," man's best effort to reach up and find God. But the problem every worshipper encounters when climbing the mountain is an impenetrable barrier which denies all further advance: it is the barrier of God's holiness and perfection. Each individual's personal sin and imperfection prevents him or her from coming any closer.

In his autobiography Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, speaks eloquently of his own struggle with this when he says: "Oh wretched man that I am. It is a constant source of torture to me that I am so far from the one I know to be my very life and being, and I know that it is my own sin and wretchedness that hides Him from me."

The Problem of Sin

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! We *do* a lot of it; we just don't like to *talk* about it! Many people do not know what sin or a sinner really is. What is sin? Sin is a violation of the law, the standard God requires of every human. A sinner is therefore someone who has broken that standard.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in people. There is a great deal of good. Humans are not as bad as they *could* be. The point is simply this: if our premise is that to get to heaven one has to be good, then how good is good enough?

The Scriptures are quite clear about this. God is not demanding "goodness." We saw above that Adam and Eve's best

efforts to cover themselves (fig leaves) were not enough. The good which is in man, all his moral achievement, is not acceptable to God—because God is not demanding goodness, He demands *perfection!*

Many will say they try to live by the Ten Commandments or by some other rule of life, such as the Golden Rule. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers we have violated our own standards at some point. This is what Paul meant when he said, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one mile deep. The world’s record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo is 29’ 4 1/2”. Yet the chances of a person jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than that of someone attempting to establish fellowship with God through his own efforts.

The standard man must meet is God’s perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that *no one* could ever reach it. To make matters worse, James tells us that “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). This means if someone breaks just one of the commandments, he is as guilty as if he had broken all ten!

The purpose of giving the Ten Commandments in the first place was not because God knew human beings would keep them perfectly. The Bible tells us that these revealed standards were intended to be to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the *condition* of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only reveal to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us or cover our sin.

The Pharisees looked at the Law and then at their own lives and said, "I'm pretty good, really good." Jesus had wanted them to come to the opposite conclusion. He even called them hypocrites! He said they were wrong to claim they were righteous enough and that all was well between them and their Maker. That is why he said, "Those who are well do not need a physician" (Matthew 9:12). When you are well, you don't seek a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick. Jesus was urging the Pharisees to be honest about themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v.13).

When my wife Carol and I travel, and I discover I'm lost, I really hate for her to make her classic statement, "You're lost. Why don't you ask for directions?" In my case, the issue is always my male pride! With the Pharisees, it was *religious* pride, as it is for all who would seek heaven on the basis of their own merits.

A wise old Baptist preacher once said, "It isn't difficult to get people saved; it is difficult to get them lost!" This is man's dilemma: like the Pharisees, people cling to the old fig leaves of self-effort instead of submitting to the covering God Himself has provided for all (Christ's sacrificial death, the Cross). Each of us must choose one or the other (John 3:18, 36).

The Problem of Righteousness

While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very outset that no one, through his own efforts, possesses the ability to make himself presentable before God. It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said, "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver ... trying to clothe himself ... but the silkworm's activity spins it a shroud. So it is with man." Adam and Eve are classic examples.

Our problem is not only that we have fallen short of God's

standard (Romans 3:23), by sinning; we also *lack* something. We not only need the removal of personal sin through blood sacrifice to satisfy divine *justice*; we need something *further* to make us fit for heaven and the divine presence of God. In other words, Christ's death in our place will keep us out of hell—but we still have the problem of getting into heaven. Isaiah spoke of this when he said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous deeds** are as **filthy rags.**" (Isaiah 64:6). Not our *sins*, but our good *deeds*! We need not only atonement for our sins, we also need righteousness to enter heaven! But it has to be a certain *kind* of righteousness.

The most righteous people of Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and, in their presence, admonished the crowds that "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment. "You mean the Pharisees aren't righteous enough to go to heaven? If *they* can't make it, who will?"

In the Garden of Eden we observe this conflict between two *kinds* of righteousness—*human righteousness*, which is clearly symbolized by the fig leaf garments Adam and Eve sewed together to make themselves presentable before God, and *divine righteousness*, which is symbolized by the adequate covering of the slain animals provided by God Himself. We find these two kinds of righteousness marching and clashing with each other all the way through both Testaments.

Paul referred to these same two righteousnesses when he said of his Jewish brethren, "I bear them witness, that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not

knowing about God's righteousness, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1).

In the former Soviet Union, rubles are printed and circulated. With those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill, and purchase things in the shops. But if you brought those rubles back to America and tried to do the same thing, the rubles would not be honored. It would be futile to try to do business with rubles in America.

Let's think of these two righteousnesses in mathematical terms. Let's call God's righteousness "+R" and human righteousness "-R." The first righteousness is *absolute*, while the second is *relative*. Over a lifetime, a human being can accumulate a huge pile of -R, but added up, it still totals -R. To do business with God in heaven, we must deal with Him in the only "currency" honored and accepted by Him, and that is +R. It is futile to try to negotiate with God on the basis of relative, human goodness. We need +R.

Where do we get such "currency?" It is *given* to us as a gift if we will accept it—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The yardstick God uses to measure everyone is His Son. This +R righteousness is ours only in Christ: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

This gracious provision is a radical departure from all other religious ideas humans have ever conceived or set forth. It is so radical that human beings would never have thought of it.

The Uniqueness of Christian Grace

We have sought to arrive at a biblical answer to the question, "Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?" We have examined the bankruptcy of every attempt by people to reach that goal

through any and every means of self-effort. We have discovered that the salvation offered by Christianity is uniquely opposed to all human efforts to secure it by working one's way into God's good graces. In fact, if God expected us to attain our salvation through good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake. He allowed His only-begotten Son to come to earth—robed in human flesh—and die a horrible death on a cross for our personal, eternal benefit. To choose a “good works” path to God is to negate the total significance of Christ's death, making it meaningless and unnecessary.

What God has to offer is free. It is a gift that is not deserved by any of us, nor could we ever repay what the gift is worth. God has dealt with humankind in grace and love. The only thing that God has asked us to do is to humbly admit that we have broken His laws, acknowledge that He has indeed made things right through His Son's sacrificial death on the cross, and accept His forgiveness by faith. We are invited to lay aside our own “fig-leaf” costumes and freely submit to the covering God has provided for us, the blood-stained garment of His Son, the very righteousness of Christ.

This is what Jesus sought to communicate in Matthew 22:1-14, the parable about the wedding feast that a king was preparing to give his son: “So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad*: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, ‘Friend, how came you here not having on a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!’”

The text does not tell us whether this person was one of the “good” ones or the “bad” ones. Why? Because it is irrelevant to what Jesus wants us to understand. The important issue was proper *attire* for the occasion. God is telling us that the

only acceptable attire for heaven is the righteousness of Christ.

As a gracious host, He stands holding out to humanity the most expensive, costly garment in the universe, and He eagerly desires to wrap us up in it—safe and warm and happy and secure:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God: for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10).

So how does this apply to you and me? Simply this: Everything that *needed* to be done for your salvation and mine was *accomplished* the moment Christ died on the cross. The penalty has been paid and God’s righteous demands satisfied. God is now free to extend eternal life as a free gift. He declares, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Gifts, of course, must be received. For that reason, Jesus said, “He who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). “Believe” means “to trust or depend on.” God is asking each person to come to Him as a sinner, recognize that His Son died on the cross of us, and trust His Son *alone* as our only hope of heaven.

This was the message, the good news which the first Christians took to the world: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In reality, every human being is just a prayer away from receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and the promise of heaven. But it has to be the *right* prayer, based on the *right* facts: that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, not “Do-Gooders”: “I have not come to call the righteous to

repentance, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). You can begin to trust Christ for your salvation today instead of your own, futile efforts of trying to be a fairly nice person all your life. Obviously, your heart attitude, your sincerity, is what really counts. God knows your heart. But if the following suggested prayer will help to bring a sense of closure and certainty to your decision to believe in, to trust Christ, then please feel free to use it as a simple guide:

“Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner, and nothing I can do will ever get me to heaven. But I believe Jesus Christ died for me and rose from the grave to prove the validity of His claim to be my Savior. He took my place and my punishment. So right now, I place my trust in Christ alone to make me presentable and acceptable to you. Come into my life. I accept the gift of your Son. Thank you that you are now within me, not based upon my feelings, but upon your promise that if I open the door of my life and invite you to come live within me and be my Savior, you would (Rev. 3:20, John 1:12). Make me the kind of person you want me to be. Begin to show me that you really have entered my life and heart, and now give me the guidance I need to live a new life in fellowship with you. Amen.”

©1998 Probe Ministries.

**Blaise Pascal: An Apologist
for Our Times – A Defense of
Christianity Ringing True**

Today

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.



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

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."[\[1\]](#)

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.[\[2\]](#) Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he “invented the syringe, refined Torricelli’s barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal’s law” of pressure.[\[3\]](#) He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn’t become a full-fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered “a monument in the evolution of French prose” by historians of the language.[\[4\]](#)

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means “thoughts” in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.[\[5\]](#)

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were “May God never abandon me!”[\[6\]](#)

The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal's apologetics, it's important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn't interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God's image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him."{8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a

problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair. [{9}](#)

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. "The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable," he says, "that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances." Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way. [{10}](#)

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn't it? But the attitude people take is this:

Just as I do
Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty.

The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me. [{11}](#)

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man's reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it." [{12}](#) Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed. [{13}](#) The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority. [{14}](#)

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions. [{15}](#) "The two so-called principles of

truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions.”{16} Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty{17}, often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”{18} In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is “the ‘intuitive’ mind” rather than “the ‘geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”{19} For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.{20} Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can

demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. “If natural things are beyond [reason],” Pascal said, “what are we to say about supernatural things?”[{21}](#)

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?[{22}](#) Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15[{23}](#), Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself (“hides” in the sense that He doesn’t speak}. One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, “God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will.” God wants to “humble [our] pride.”[{24}](#)

But God doesn’t remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. “If there were no obscurity,” Pascal says, “man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure.”[{25}](#)

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. “God is a hidden God,” says Pascal, “ and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him.*”[{26}](#)

Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God's existence, and teach both doctrine and morality. [{27}](#)

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn't do any good. As Pascal says, "That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty." A person with this knowledge has not "made much progress toward his salvation." [{28}](#) What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition." [{29}](#)

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's

thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."[{30}](#) "By faith we know he exists," he says.[{31}](#) "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."[{32}](#) Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."[{33}](#)

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."[{34}](#)

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.[{35}](#) He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."[{36}](#) He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon

and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [sic] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the types of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . ." People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn't the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, "it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe," he says, " is the cross." At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17:

“Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”[{43}](#)

The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

Let us then examine the point and say: “Either God exists, or he does not.” But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.[{44}](#)

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it’s true, while the losses will be insignificant if it’s false.[{45}](#) If it’s true and you have rejected it, you’ve lost everything. However, if it’s false but you have believed it, at least you’ve led a good life and you haven’t lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it’s better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You’re going to live one way or the other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can’t remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. “I am being forced to gamble and I am not free,” he says, “for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?”[{46}](#) After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the

emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing." [{47}](#)

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him. [{48}](#) By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that

man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, *Blaise Pascal* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, *Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. *Mind On Fire* also includes edited versions

of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.

6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. *Ibid.*, 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. *Ibid.*, 124.
14. *Ibid.*, 236.
15. Houston, 58.
16. *Ibid.*, 58.
17. *Ibid.*, 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. *Ibid.*, 229.
21. *Ibid.*, 238.
22. *Ibid.*, 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. *Ibid.*, 249.
26. *Ibid.*, 251.
27. Houston, 147.
28. *Ibid.*, 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. *Ibid.*, 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. *Ibid.*, 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. *Ibid.*, 240.

39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

C.S. Lewis: His Enduring Legacy

C.S. Lewis was a tremendously gifted writer of profound insight and wisdom. Todd Kappelman argues that both Christians and non-Christians should read his wonderful writings, the major of which are reviewed here.

A Christian For All Men and A Man For All Seasons

There was a time not too long ago when nearly half of the Christians I enjoyed regular fellowship with, not only knew who C.S. Lewis was, but had actually read at least one of his books. Lewis represented for us a means by which we could enter into some of the deepest theological and philosophical discussions imaginable without possessing a degree in either theology or philosophy. Lewis's writing spoke to children, soldiers, Oxford professors, believers and unbelievers alike.

His inviting, conversational tone in writing made him one of the first authors that I can say with some confidence I truly know.

Today, approximately 18 years after my first encounter with Lewis, I know people who have read him, and still others who have heard of him, but far too many who do not read him, nor recommend him to their friends. Without going into a discussion about the shift in our society from being text-driven to media-driven, I would like to make a case for the need to read Lewis, and to recommend him to our friends, both believers and unbelievers. In this essay I will discuss some of his major works and recommend some of my personal favorites that I believe you will enjoy reading.

One reason I recommend Lewis is that, given the extremely diverse society we live in today, the church is in profound need of a person of integrity and knowledge who can speak to as many different groups as possible. Lewis was, and remains, one of the best men for this task. He was born in 1898 and died in 1963. The story of his early life is one of conversion from hard core intellectual atheism to Christianity, and then to one of the great champions of the Christian faith in this century. He was an Oxford professor whose range of writings included theology, ethics, philosophy, literary criticism, science fiction, children's stories, imaginative literature, and much more. There are very few areas of concern in which Lewis did not have something say, and he always said it with both wit and sensitivity.

Those who have never read Lewis can begin with one of the many volumes of collected essays on theology, philosophy, and cultural issues. *God in the Dock*, with 48 essays, is an excellent place to start. One will encounter titles such as "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ," where Lewis says that we must either accept or reject the gospel, but we cannot explain it away. Other essays have titles such as "The Laws of Nature" or "Religion and Science." One of my favorites in this

collection is entitled "We Have No Right to Happiness," in which Lewis warns us that the continual pursuit of happiness as an ultimate goal will result in an unnatural affection for something that will eventually sweep us away.

In a small collection entitled *The World's Last Night and Other Essays*, one will find titles such as "The Efficacy of Prayer" and "Good Work and Good Works." A larger volume entitled *The Seeing Eye* has the wonderful essays "Christianity and Culture" and "The Poison of Subjectivism." These volumes of essays should provide an excellent introduction to Lewis, and help the new reader understand why he is one of the most beloved Christian writers of our time.

Mere Christianity

We have been discussing the importance of reading the works of C.S. Lewis and have urged those who are not familiar with his works to begin with one of the collections of essays such as *God In The Dock*, *The World's Last Night*, or *The Seeing Eye*.

These essays are an excellent place to start, but it is in *Mere Christianity* that Lewis details what he saw as the essentials of the faith. All of Lewis's writings have a common theme: a reasonable and thorough faith which is capable of reaching everyone from the most highly educated to the simplest common man on the street. Whether it is the Narnia books for children, the science-fiction trilogy, the essays on theology and philosophy, or the technical works on miracles and the problem of pain, Lewis is committed to a rational and well thought-out faith. There was no easy faith for the Oxford professor, and Lewis would have nothing to do with a religion that was not grounded in both history and fact.

Originally aired as "The Broadcast Talks" in the early forties, *Mere Christianity* has an almost conversational tone to it. This is one of the interesting features that first attracted me to Lewis. It's as if one were sitting down to tea

and having a discussion with him; he is continually anticipating, and answering, the questions that his imaginary interlocutor might have. It must be remembered that Lewis is not arguing for a specific denominational faith in this work. Rather, he is attempting to raise the basic tenets of the Christian faith for discussion, acceptance, or even rejection. Lewis says that if one is hesitating between two Christian "denominations," one will not learn from reading this book whether he or she ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic.(1) The faith Lewis is outlining is mere, or basic, Christianity.

Many objections can be, and have been, made to this ecumenical approach. However, this is also the strength of Lewis, and one which I believe is especially relevant for the modern, pluralistic times we live in. Lewis went so far in the ecumenical aspect of this work that he sent the original transcripts for *Mere Christianity* to four clergymen: an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic. They all had helpful advice, and all said they could live with the brand of Christianity that Lewis was detailing as "mere" Christianity.(2) This is a remarkable response which might be difficult to reproduce today.

In the first of the three books, or chapters, Lewis discusses the natural moral law found in all men. He argues that this natural understanding of right and wrong is a clue as to the nature of the universe and its Creator. In the second of the three books, Lewis outlines the basics of the Christian faith. It is here that the reader encounters the "mere" Christianity of the title. Finally, in book three, Lewis discusses the behavior which one should rightly expect from the believer. Some of the topics he discusses are sexual morality, marriage, forgiveness, charity, hope, and faith. Lewis takes the ideas from the three chapters on the law of human nature and develops that beautifully into the beliefs and behavior one should expect from Christians. *Mere Christianity* also provides

an excellent introduction to Lewis at his best, and is a foundation text for understanding his work.

The Space Trilogy

The space trilogy is remarkable as both a good work of science fiction, and a great work of imaginative theology. Lewis's science fiction is a sophisticated and highly developed fantasy dealing with the differences between natural and supernatural philosophy, original sin and temptation, as well as the perennial struggle between good and evil.

Out of The Silent Planet, published in 1938, is the first volume in the series. The silent planet, Earth, is so named because it has been cut off from beatific language as a result of sin.⁽³⁾ In this initial book, we are introduced to many of the characters who will be used in the following volumes. Elwin Ransom, often taken to be a development of Lewis himself, is a philologist from Cambridge University who is kidnapped while on a walking holiday in the Midlands and taken to Malacandra, or Mars, by two evil men named Devine and Weston.

Perelandra, the second volume in the series, was published in 1943, and is my personal favorite in the space or science fiction trilogy. Perelandra, or Venus, is a paradisiacal world full of floating and fixed islands and a green-fleshed Adam and Eve who live in a pre-fallen universe. This unfallen state of existence is perfectly symbolized in the relationship between "The Green Lady," as Eve is called, her husband, and the animal and fish life of the planet. This is a harmonious picture of a world where the natural and spiritual co-exist in beautiful perfection. In the original garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Perelandra, the Green Lady and her husband are forbidden to be on the fixed land after sunset. One of the most interesting features in Perelandra is the naivete of the Green Lady and her husband. They live in an unfallen world,

and therefore are unaware of the consequences following willful disobedience. *Perelandra* is a stunning fictional treatment about the nature of obedience and man's fallen nature.

That Hideous Strength, published in 1945, is the third and final installment in the trilogy. In this volume, the action is once again set on earth, the silent planet, and Lewis shows the reader that the result of continual and willful sin is the destruction of the individual, and the propagation of evil on a worldwide scale. As a study of evil, *That Hideous Strength* shows how the wicked sow the seeds of their own destruction.(4)

The brilliance of the space trilogy is that Lewis is able to reverse the perceptions found in the science-fiction of his day and counter that with a theological lesson woven into the fabric of fiction. Lewis understood the ability of fiction to capture the imagination of the reader and thus its ability to be used as a vehicle to raise serious theological concerns. He once said, "Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under the cover of romance without their knowing it." Those who thought that C.S. Lewis was primarily an author of theological and philosophical works will find a refreshing change of pace in the space trilogy.

The Problem of Pain and A Grief Observed

Now, let's continue our discussion by looking at two works by C.S. Lewis which deal with the problem of evil and suffering. We should begin our discussion by stating that the problem of pain and suffering, or the problem of evil, as it is often referred to, is one of the oldest and strongest objections against the Christian faith. Briefly, the problem of evil runs as follows: If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, He should know about the plight of man, He should care about our situation, and He should rid the universe of pain and suffering.

The Problem of Pain, published in 1940, is specifically dedicated to the intellectual problems raised by evil and suffering. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis begins by discussing God's omnipotence and characteristic goodness. By beginning with God's omnipotence, or His unlimited power, Lewis addresses the first charge in the problem of evil, namely that God may in fact be unable to rid the universe of evil. Here Lewis simply states that one need not infer from the existence of an omnipotent God and the existence of evil that God is unable to do something about it. Lewis advances several options; such as God may be using the evil to work out His plan among men; He may be ridding the universe of evil and we cannot see the end; or most importantly, evil is a necessary condition of the relationship between God and His creatures if they are to have a free will.

Again, when addressing the problem of God's goodness and His willingness to help out His creation, Lewis simply argues that one need not, and in fact cannot, come to the conclusion that God is not good based on the available data. We, as finite creatures, argues Lewis, are in no position to draw these kinds of conclusions. There are many perfectly logical explanations for the coexistence of evil and an all-powerful and all-good God. Subsequent chapters in *The Problem of Pain* deal with human wickedness, the fall of man, human pain, animal pain, and heaven and hell.

Twenty years after the publication of *The Problem of Pain*, in 1961, and just two years before his death at the age of 65, Lewis published a very small work entitled *A Grief Observed*. Whereas *The Problem of Pain* is a theoretical treatment of the problem of evil and suffering, *A Grief Observed* is the pragmatic working out of the problem of evil.

In April of 1956, C.S. Lewis, a 57-year-old dedicated bachelor, married Joy Davidman, an American poet with two young children. Lewis and Davidman enjoyed four years of blissful marriage and were intensely happy together. Joy died

of cancer in 1960 at the age of 45. Her death shattered Lewis, and his pilgrimage through the process of bereavement resulted in his writing *A Grief Observed*. When reading this work, one will see Lewis at his most tender moments. He discusses their relationship, his struggles through her illness, his doubts after her death, and most importantly his intense efforts to come to grips with death and dying. *A Grief Observed* shows that Lewis had both emotional and intellectual depth. Any Christian would benefit from reading this small and extremely accessible work.

The Screwtape Letters and The Great Divorce

In this discussion we have sought to inform you of the wide range of subjects that Lewis addressed in his writing. In the process we have attempted to direct you to those books and essays that would (1) heighten your desire to become acquainted with his works, or (2) stimulate you to continue reading them. At this point we will look at one of the most widely read of Lewis's books, *The Screwtape Letters*, and another less read, but related work, *The Great Divorce*.

The Screwtape Letters, first published in 1942, is one of the most straightforward and pointed works about hell and demonic activity that Lewis ever penned. The book is a satire about damnation and the efforts of demons to influence men. The "letters" are correspondence between a senior demon named Screwtape, who has centuries of experience in the art of tempting humans, and his younger nephew, Wormwood. The younger demon is a fresh graduate from The Tempters Training College and is on his first assignment. His task involves attempting to block, by any means necessary, a certain individual from becoming a Christian.

Lewis's audience is allowed to read the correspondence between these two demons, whose greatest desire is to facilitate the

downfall and ultimate damnation of human beings. One is able actually to enter into a kind of “psychology of damnation” and see how the forces of evil operate in men’s lives.

The Great Divorce, written just three years later in 1945, deals with heaven and hell and continues the satirical and comedic style of *The Screwtape Letters*. In his story Lewis speaks in the first person and is in the midst of a dream about a bus ride to heaven. The story opens in hell, where Lewis is preparing to leave with several people who are permanent residents in hell. Lewis meets people in various stages of damnation, much like Dante’s *Inferno*, all of whom appear to have chosen their eternal residence freely. The story is a contrast between the “solid” people of the heavenly realm and the transparent ghost-like people of hell. The less real inhabitants of hell cannot participate in, or endure, the realness of heaven. The analogy illustrates the difficulty the unregenerate have in even understanding the things of God. Do not be fooled by the satirical nature of *The Great Divorce* or *The Screwtape Letters*, for both contain an abundance of theology. Issues concerning salvation, damnation, heaven, hell, the free will of men, and the practical matters of the Christian faith are all present in these two volumes.

In concluding this discussion, I would first like to urge anyone who is not familiar with the works of C.S. Lewis to take the time to become acquainted with him. He is one of the most beloved and original Christian writers of this century. Secondly, to those who have read Lewis, and enjoyed him in the past, please recommend this wonderful author to your Christian friends. Lastly, and most importantly, I strongly urge anyone who has a friend who is an unbeliever to use a work such as *Mere Christianity*, or a collection of essays such as *God in the Dock*, as introductions to an ecumenical and eloquent apologist for the Christian faith.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillian, 1943). (Originally aired in three parts as "The Broadcast Talks," p. 6.)
2. Ibid., p. 8.
3. Colin Duriez, *The C.S. Lewis Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to His Life, Thought and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1990), p. 199.
4. Ibid., p. 200.

©1998 Probe Ministries

Christian Psychology: Is Something Missing?

The Church as a Healing Community

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

While specifically Christian counseling was once rare in the church, today it is a recognized part of many churches. As Christian counseling has become more widespread, some see it as the answer for the struggles that seem to plague most of

us. The therapeutic worldview sees many of our problems and struggles in life as stemming from unresolved problems arising in childhood. The cataloging and diagnosis of psychological disorders has become widespread, both within the church and in the culture at large. Professional counselors are seen as the primary way of dealing with these disorders. How many of us, when faced with someone enduring an ugly divorce, or hounded by problems of self-guilt, or struggling with their self-image, don't think, "This person needs to see a counselor"?

Larry Crabb has done much to bring counseling into the American church. Having written books for more than 23 years, Crabb has always seen the church as being central in the counseling process. He has trained many of the counselors working in churches today. He has written books, taught, founded schools, and lectured around the country on Christian psychology. He has successfully questioned the church's distrust of psychology.

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

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

Going even deeper, Crabb asks the heretical question, Are psychological disorders really at the bottom of most of our struggles? "I conclude," says Crabb, "that we have made a terrible mistake. For most of the twentieth century, we have wrongly defined soul wounds as psychological disorders and

delegated their treatment to trained specialists.”[\(1\)](#) What he proposes in his book, *Connecting*, is both revolutionary and profound. In giving us new life in Christ, God has put in each of us the power to connect with other believers and to find the good God has put in them. We have the opportunity to heal most wounded souls. This is Larry Crabb’s proposal. While he is still solidly behind professional counseling, he has come to see a broader place for healing within the context of Christian relationships. In this essay we will talk about what it means for two people to connect, and how God can use this connection to heal the deepest wounds of life and expose a beautiful vision of God’s work in us.

What Is Connecting?

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

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

In this book, Larry Crabb calls this whole picture into question. He describes the most common ways we react to people who are hurting and puts those reactions into two categories: moralistic and psychological. The moralist looks for what scriptures have been disobeyed, rebukes our disobedience, calls us to admit our sin and repent, and sees that we have some sort of accountability in the future. The psychologist listens to us, tries to find out what is wrong internally, and

then helps us learn healthier ways of living. This process often takes months of self-exploration to find the roots of our problem, and to chart a course towards self-awareness and better ways of coping with the world.

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

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

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

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

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

What Keeps Us From Connecting?

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

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

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

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

of difficulty, not ease (2 Tim. 3:12). We are being prepared for perfection, but we are not to expect it here on earth. God has prepared a perfect city for us, but we are not to try to create it on our own now (Heb. 11:13-16).

Fire lighters are like those people described in Isaiah 50:10-11. They walk in darkness, but rather than trust in God to guide them by His light, they light their own torches, and set their own fires to see by. Fire lighters, Crabb says, are those people who must have a plan they know will work. Their demand of God is the pragmatist's "Tell me what will work!" Fire lighters trust and hold closely to their plans, so connecting is hard for them because it would require them to trust God and not know what might happen next. Connecting requires us to give up our plans and expectations so that we can recognize and enjoy God's plans. We can either trust God or trust our own plans, but we cannot do both. It is not wrong to plan, but we must be willing to give up our plans when Jesus does not fit into them in the way that we want. As C.S. Lewis describes Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: "It's not as if he were a tame Lion." [\(4\)](#)

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

Many people who feel God's calling in their lives, also assume that God will take care of them and of their families. And He will, but not always in the way that we imagine. As we raise

our children and watch the terrible struggles that seem to overcome so many other young people, we may feel that at least God will protect our own children from such affliction. But if our trust is that our serving the Lord is protecting our family, then we have built up a false sense of security. We are trying to cover our own uncertainty about the future with the whitewash of our own good deeds. God builds us up and shows us our need to depend on Him alone in our tribulations, but we often want to hide ourselves and protect our families from the very misfortunes that God wants to use to strengthen us. We are whitewashing a failing wall when we try to put up a hedge around ourselves and our families, sure that God will protect us from trouble. Everything that happens in our lives has come through God first, has been "Father-filtered," as someone once said. But we must depend on the Lord in all circumstances, not just when we feel protected. God loves us perfectly, but His desire is to give us His character, not to protect us from any difficulty. That is why, as James says, we are to greet tribulations as friends, and not with fear.

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

Well diggers also are characterized by something that marks our whole first-world culture: the desire for satisfaction now. Well diggers dig their own wells because it often seems faster than the way God is providing water. We want to be

filled, and we want it immediately. We live in a fast-everything world. We stand around the microwave oven, wondering why it takes so long to heat a cup of water. Or, more seriously, we wonder why God is taking so long to bring along the right woman or man, so we find our own ways to satisfy our desires, whether in pornography, or cheap sex, or relationships we know can't last. We want to be satisfied, and if God seems slow, we find our own satisfaction any way we can.

God plans for eternity, and builds to last forever. But it takes time, and patience. If we fulfill our own desires, we will be like the Samaritan woman at the well: we will soon thirst again. But if we allow God to provide for our thirst, He fills us with living water, and we are filled in ways we could never have known otherwise.

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

Finding What God is Doing in Others

To connect with another believer, we “discover what God is up to and join Him in nourishing the life He has already given.” [\(6\)](#) This is why Larry Crabb sees connecting as central to the Gospel. To connect with another Christian is to let the power of the Holy Spirit in you, find the good that God has planted in the spirit of another believer. It requires us to get past our flesh, which Paul instructs us to crucify (Gal. 5:24), so that we can be alive to the Spirit, the one Who makes connection possible. Connecting with someone else is a triumph of the Spirit over my own fleshly desires to control my own life (being a city builder), to create a plan I know will work (fire lighter), to protect myself against the uncertainties of life (wall whitewasher), and to find my own

ways to feel good when I want to (well digger). To connect with a fellow believer I must see what God sees in him or her, not just what I can see.

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

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

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

If we would truly connect with someone else, we must also be putting to death the flesh and feeding the spirit. Larry Crabb goes back to an old Puritan phrase, “mortifying the flesh,” to describe what we are to do as we discover urges of the flesh rising up in us. As Crabb emphatically writes: “The disguise [of the flesh] must be ripped away, the horror of the enemy's ugliness and the pain he creates must be seen, not to understand the ugliness, not to endlessly study the pain, but

to shoot the enemy.” [\(7\)](#) This is an ongoing war, one we will fight until we are home with Jesus, but alongside this battle to “crucify the flesh” (Gal. 5:24) we must also feed the Spirit. By this Crabb means that we are, as a community of believers, to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). As we put to death the flesh, we are indeed made alive in the Spirit (Rom. 8:10-14).

Discerning a Vision for Others

Larry Crabb’s book *Connecting* has two subtitles. The first subtitle is “Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships.” Earlier, we saw how we are healed as we allow Christ to sweep away all of our own methods of dealing with life. Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers, these are all ways that we try to manage life. Jesus does not ask us to manage our lives. Instead, as a father might take his son through a crowded mall, God asks us to take His hand, and let Him guide us to where He chooses. The urges we need to kill are the very urges that whisper in our ears that we must take care of ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

6. Crabb, 49.

7. Crabb, 91.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

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

The Postmodernism Revolution

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

importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

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

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a

revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

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

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and hand-

written texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

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

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral

and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

The Advent of the Modern

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

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

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

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

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

The End of the Modern and the Advent of

the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

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

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

one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

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

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the

twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

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

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

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

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident

everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

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

Bibliography

1. Allen, Diogens. *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1989.
2. Anderson, Leith. *A Church for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1992.
3. Barna, George. *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need To Know About Life in the Year 2000*. Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990.
4. McCallum, Dennis. *The Death of Truth*. Minneapolis, Minn.:

Bethany House Publishers, 1996.

5. Evans, C. Stephen, & Westphal, Merold. *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.

6. Lundin, Roger. *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.

7. Oden, Thomas C. *Agenda for Theology, After Modernity . . . What?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990.

8. Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

9. Veith, Jr., Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994.

10. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Reason Within The Bounds of Religion*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

The Christian Mind

The Need for a Christian Mind

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17)(1) This familiar admonition was first spoken by John the Baptist and soon after it was echoed by Jesus. The phrase is certainly worthy of a great deal of attention; it provides a lot of food for thought. For the moment, though, let’s

concentrate on the first word: *Repent*. This expression is a central portion of the doctrines concerning sin and salvation. Literally it refers to a *change of mind*. It does not mean that one is to be sorry for some action. Thus, the first hearers were admonished to realize that they were in need of radical change before a holy God, beginning with their minds. They were to turn from sin to God by changing their thinking. Certainly the same holds true for us. Most of us are in need of reminders that lead us back to one of the crucial aspects of our salvation: repentance, or a change in our thinking. In addition, we should couple such memories with the realization that our changed minds should always be alive to God. To paraphrase Kepler's famous phrase, we are to "think God's thoughts after Him." Since the Christian life is all-inclusive, the mind is included.

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

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

Wilson, the father of what is called sociobiology, proposes that we can determine an ethical system based on scientifically observable evidence. He writes, "The empiricist argument holds that if we explore the biological roots of moral behavior, and explain their material origins and biases, we should be able to fashion a wise and enduring ethical consensus."(3) Thus, ethics are not to be

found external to physical reality; there is no mind through which we can respond ethically. It seems that Wilson and those who are like-minded believe “the mind is headed for an ignoble fate. Just as the twinkle of stars was reduced to nuclear explosions, and life itself to biochemical reactions, so the brain may one day be explained by the same forces that run the rest of the universe.”(4)

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

What’s the matter?

Never mind.

What is mind?

No matter.(5)

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

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 1)

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). Imagine you are in a courtroom.

You are the defense attorney; the prosecutor is God Himself. He has just invited you, Judah's attorney, to engage in debate concerning the case at hand which happens to focus on the crimes of your client. Indeed, He wants the two of you to *reason together*. That is the scenario presented in this famous passage from the first chapter of Isaiah. God was inviting Judah to debate a case in court.(7) What a remarkable idea! And what a stunning statement concerning the importance of the mind. God was calling upon His people to use their minds to see if they could engage Him in debate concerning their sins.

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

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

- Suppressing the truth
- Rejecting God

- Foolish speculations
- Foolish hearts
- Professing wisdom
- Exchanging God for a counterfeit
- Lusting hearts
- Exchanging truth for a lie
- Worshipping the creature
- Degrading passions
- Exchanging the natural for the unnatural
- Committing indecent acts
- Depraved minds

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

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

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

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

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

*Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest.*

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

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 2)

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

Reason is a term that is descriptive of the Christian mind. This does not mean that a Christian is to be a rationalist, but rather he is to use reason based on the reason of God found in Scripture. For example, on one of several occasions Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus to test Him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus responded by

referring to their ability to discern signs of certain kinds of weather. Then He said, "Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3)? Obviously He was noting how people use reason to arrive at conclusions, but the Christian mind would conclude the things of God. The book of Acts indicates that the apostle Paul used reason consistently to persuade his hearers of the truth of his message. Acts 17:2-3 states that "according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths *reasoned* [emphasis added] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." For two years in Ephesus Paul was "reasoning [emphasis added] daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). In light of the fact that our contemporary world attempts to reject reason, such examples should spur us to hold out for the possibility of reasonable dialogue with those around us. After all, those who reject reason must use reason to reject reason.

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

heart may be enlightened” (Eph. 1:18-19). May this beautiful prayer apply to us as we consider how to use our God-given minds!

Mandates for the Mind

“AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR

SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” (Mark 12:30). These words

have echoed for thousands of years, beginning with Moses and leading to Jesus. They contain the

first of what I call *Mandates for the Mind*: Strive to Know God. To love someone we must

know him or her. In the case of my wife, for instance, it would have been absurd to declare that I

loved her before ever meeting her. My love for her implies an intimate knowledge *about*

and knowledge *of* her. In the same manner we are to strive both to know *about* God

and to *know* Him intimately. Our minds are crucial to this mandate. It is my contention that

one of the major problems in contemporary Christianity is that too many of us are attempting know

God without using our minds to investigate what He has told us of Himself in Scripture.

The second mandate is that the Christian mind should strive for truth. “Jesus therefore was saying

to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of

Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” (John 8:31-32). Abiding in

His word implies a continual dedication to using the mind to search the Scriptures, the place where

His truth is written.

The third mandate pertains to maturity. Romans 12:2 declares:

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” It is pertinent to note that the words *conformed*, *transformed*, and *prove* refer to continuous action. Thus, the Christian mind is to be characterized by continuous development toward maturity. Hebrews 5:14 refers to Scripture as “solid food” as the writer describes the mature mind. He then asserts that the Christian is to “press on [continually] to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). Such maturity is a strategic need in the contemporary church.

The fourth mandate involves proclaiming and defending the faith. The maturing Christian mind will actively engage the minds of those around him. For example, Paul modeled this while in Athens:

“[H]e was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him” (Acts 17:17-18). Paul proclaimed and defended the truth of the gospel in the synagogue with his own people, among the populace, and even with the intellectual elite of the time. Such encounters are easily duplicated in our day.

The fifth mandate refers to the need for study. Philippians 4:8 states: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” Note the final phrase: “let your mind dwell,” a clause indicative

of the need for concentration, or study.

The phrase also includes a command that such study is to be continuous. We are to ponder, or think on the things of God.

Applying the Christian Mind

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

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

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

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

Our first story involves a fellow we will call Billy. Billy is an excellent softball player. Three nights per week he plays for his company team. He has a reputation as a fierce competitor who will do virtually anything to win. He also has a volatile temper that explodes in ways that embarrass his family and teammates. On some occasions he even has had shoving and cursing bouts with opposing players. Each Sunday, and even on other occasions, he attends a well-known church in his city. One Sunday his pastor shared an exceptional sermon based on 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Upon hearing this message, he suddenly realized that softball games could not be isolated from his commitment to Christ. Whether in his business, his family, or his softball games he needed to stop and think: if he is a temple of God, all of life is a sacred task. His life,

including softball, was never the same.

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

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

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

glory within the routines of life.

Notes

1. All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Version.
2. Sharon Begley, John Carey, and Ray Sawhill, "How the Brain Works," *Newsweek* (7 February 1983), 40.
3. Edward O. Wilson, "The Biological Basis of Morality," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1998), 54.
4. Begley, 47.
5. Quoted in Begley.
6. Charles Habib Malik, "Your Mind Matters; Cultivate It," *Active Christians in Education* (January 1981), 1A.
7. R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 377.
8. J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997), 39.
9. R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 135.