Digging Our Own Grave: The Secular Captivity of the Church

Rick Wade provides an overview of how the Christian church has become captive to the godless values and perspective of the surrounding culture, based on Os Guinness’ book The Last Christian on Earth.

Our Real Enemy

If memory serves me correctly, it was my introduction to such concepts as secularization and pluralization. I’m speaking of the book The Gravedigger Files written by Os Guinness in the early 1980s. The subtitle of The Gravedigger Files is Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church. The book is a fictional dialogue between two members of a council which has as its purpose the undermining of the Christian church. The Deputy Director of the Central Security Council gives one of his subordinates advice on how to accomplish their goal in his area.

In 2010, Guinness published a revised and updated version of Gravedigger Files. He gave it the new title The Last Christian on Earth. The titled was inspired in part by Luke 18:8: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

What Guinness wanted to do in Gravedigger and the updated version was to show how the church in America is being undermined from within. We concern ourselves so much about outside enemies without realizing that we are at times our own worst enemies. He wrote: “The Christian faith contributed decisively to the rise of the modern world, but it has been undermined decisively by the modern world it helped to create. The Christian faith has become its own gravedigger.” {1}

The primary focus of Probe Ministries now is what’s been called the cultural captivity of the church. All too many of us are influenced more by our culture than by the Bible. It’s impossible to separate oneself from one’s surrounding culture, to be sure, but when there is conflict, we are called to follow Christ. Cultural captivity is subtle. It slowly creeps up on us, and, before we know it, it has soaked into our pores and infected much of what we think and do. “Subversion works best when the process is slow and subtle,” Guinness’s Deputy Director says. “Subtle compromise is always better than
This book is helpful for seeing ourselves in a clearer light, and for understanding why some of the things we do, which seem so harmless, are really very harmful to our own Christian lives and to the church.

**Stages of Subversion**

Rather than directly attacking the church, the enemy finds it more profitable to try to undermine it. “Subversion” is the word Os Guinness’s Deputy Director uses in the book *The Last Christian on Earth*. How does this happen?

This process of undermining comes in various stages. Three of them are demoralization, subversion, and defection.

*Demoralization* is the softening up of the church through such things as hypocrisy and public scandals. Morale drops, and our ability to resist the devil’s advances decreases.

*Subversion* comes about from winning over key church leaders who begin to trumpet “radical” and “daring” ideas (better words for this, Guinness says, may be “revisionist” and “unfaithful”

*Defection* comes when prominent members abandon the church, such as when former fundamentalists publicly deny the divine authority of the Bible.

Faithfulness, which once was understood as being committed to God, now has a new focus. The desire to be “in the world but not of the world” is realigned. The church’s commitment to the world turns into attachment, and worldliness settles in. “Worldliness” is a term once used by fundamentalists to describe being too attached to the world, but it went out of favor because of the excesses of separationism. It was a word to be snickered at by evangelicals who were adept—or thought they were adept—at being in the world without becoming its servant. This snickering, however, doesn’t hide the fact that the evangelical sub-culture exhibits a significant degree of being of the world, or worldly.

Moving through these stages, the Deputy Director says, has led the church deeper and deeper into cultural captivity. The church becomes so identified with the culture that it no longer can act independently of it. Then it finds itself living with the consequences of its choices. Says the Deputy Director, “Our supreme prize at this level is the complete devastation of the Church by getting the Adversary [or God] to judge her himself. “Here, in a stroke,” he continues, “is the beauty of subversion through worldliness and its infinite superiority to persecution. . . . if the Adversary is to judge his own people, who are we to complain?”

**Forces of Modernism**

In *The Last Christian*, Os Guinness describes three challenges of modernity which aid in the subversion of the church. They are secularization, privatization, and pluralization. These forces work to squeeze us into the mold of modernistic culture. To too great an extent, they have been successful.

*Secularization* is the process of separating religious ideas and institutions from the public sphere. Guinness’s Deputy Director speaks of society being “freed” from religious influence. This is how secularists see the separation. Religion is seen as restrictive and oppressive and harmful, and the
public square needs to be free of it. All ideas and beliefs are welcome as long as they aren’t explicitly grounded in religious belief. Because of the influence of the public arena in our lives, Guinness points out that “Secularization ensures that ordinary reality is not just the official reality but also the only reality. Beyond what modern people can see, touch, taste and smell is quite simply nothing that matters.”{7}

If religion is removed from the public square, the immediate result is privatization, the restriction of religion to our private worlds. This can be the small communities of our churches or it can mean our own individual lives. Guinness writes that “today, where religion still survives in the modern world, no matter how passionate or committed the believer, it amounts to little more than a private preference, a spare-time hobby, and a leisure pursuit.”{8}

The third force is pluralization. With the meeting of many cultures comes the awareness that there are many options with regard to food, dress, relationships, entertainment, religion, and other aspects of life. The number of options multiplies in all areas, “especially,” notes Guinness, “at the level of worldviews, faiths and ideologies.”{9} Choosing isn’t a simple matter anymore since it’s so widely believed that there is no truth in such matters. In fact, choosing is what counts. Guinness writes, “what matters is no longer good choice or right choice or wise choice, but simply choice.”{10}

Some Characteristics of Subversion

What are some characteristics of a subverted church? Os Guinness discusses several in his book The Last Christian on Earth.

One result of being pushed into our own private worlds by secularization is that we construct our own sub-culture and attempt to keep a distance. But then we turn around and model our sub-culture after the wider culture. For example, it’s no secret that evangelical Christianity is heavily commercialized. Our Christianity becomes our style reflected in plenty of Christian kitsch and in being surrounded by the latest in fashions. The depth of our captivity to things—even Christian-ish things—becomes a measure of the shallowness of our Christianity. Compared to what Jesus and the apostles offered, which included sacrifice and suffering, says Guinness, “today’s spiritual diet . . . is refined and processed. All the cost, sacrifice and demand are removed.”{11}

Another pitfall is rationalization, when we have to weigh and measure everything in modernistic ways. We’re guided by “measurable outcomes” and “best practices” more than by the leading of the Spirit.{12}

Feeling forced to keep our Christian lives separate from the wider culture—the sacred/secular split, it’s been called—reduces Christianity in size. We don’t know how to apply it to the larger world (apart from excursion-style evangelism). “Many Christians,” Guinness writes, “have so personal a theology and so private a morality that they lack the criteria by which to judge society from a Christian perspective.”{13} Lacking the ability to even make sound judgments about contemporary issues from a distinctly Christian perspective, we’re unable to speak in a way that commands attention. Christianity is thought at best to be “socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging,” as someone said.{14}

A really sad result of the reshaping of Christianity is that people wonder why they should want it at all. The church is the pillar of truth, Paul says (1 Tim. 3:15). The plausibility of Christianity rises and falls with the condition of the church. If the church is weak, Christianity will seem weak. Is this the message we want to convey?
A Wrong Way to Respond

In the face of the pressures of the modern world on us, the conservative church has responded in varying ways in the wider culture.

Os Guinness describes what he calls the push and pull phases of public involvement by conservatives. The push phase comes when conservatives realize how much influence they have lost. For much of the nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity was dominant in public life. Over the last century that has been stripped away, and conservatives have seen what they held near and dear taken away. This loss of respect and position in our society has resulted in insecurity. {15}

In response, conservative Christians push for power by means of political action and influence in education and the mass media. “But, since the drive for power is born of social impotence rather than spiritual authority,” Guinness writes, “the final result will be compromise and disillusionment.” They fall “for the delusion of power without authority.” {16}

When they recognize the loss of purity and principles in their actions, they begin to pull back and disentangle themselves from the centers of power. There is a return to the authority of the gospel without, however, a sense of the power of the gospel. Standing on the outside, as it were, they resort to “theologies stressing prophetic detachment, not constructive involvement.” {17} This is the phase of “hypercritical separatism.”

Then comes a third phase, the enemies’ coup de grâce. Standing back to view all this, some Christians experience what Guinness’s Deputy Director gloatingly describes as “a fleeting moment when they feel so isolated in their inner judgments that they wonder if they are the last Christian left.” There is left “a residue of part self-pity, part discouragement, and part shame that unnerves the best of them.” {18} But these are the few. The many are simply kept asleep, the Director is happy to report, unaware of what has happened.

This article has given only a taste of Os Guinness’s message to us. The hope for the church is a return to the gospel in all its purity and power. I invite you to read The Last Christian on Earth and get a fuller picture of the situation and what we can do to bring about change.

Notes

1. Os Guinness, The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2010), 11.
2. Ibid., 51, 52.
3. Ibid., 28.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 32-34.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Ibid., 72.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid., 97.
11. Ibid., 159.
12. Ibid., 138.
13. Ibid., 155.
15. Guinness, Last Christian, 166.
In looking at the state of American Christianity, Steve Cable examines how handling data inaccurately can produce wildly varying conclusions.

Recent reports on the current state of Christianity in America could create emotional whiplash, making one feel elated one moment and depressed the next. People are quick to comment on survey results and their own experiences. Within the last year, we have run the gamut from Glenn Stanton’s book, The Myth of the Dying Church: How Christianity is Actually Thriving in America and the World,{1} to a Pew Research article, In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.{2}

These titles appear to represent two very different viewpoints. Which is it? Are we thriving or declining at a rapid pace?

Finding the answer requires one to thoughtfully articulate your question in at least two ways:

1. What do you mean by Christianity? Are you referring to all potential Christians both Protestant and Catholic or are you focused on a subset, such as Evangelicals? And,

2. Is anything beyond affiliation with a church necessary to be considered an active Christian? Examples might include a biblical understanding of how one gets to heaven and belief in the Bible.

You also need to thoroughly understand the available survey data that might throw light on your question. You need to understand what questions are asked and how they are worded. Then you analyze the responses to the set of relevant questions to gain insight on your topic of interest. Remember, no survey asks the exact questions you would ideally use. That sounds like more work than most of you want to attempt. Unfortunately, most of the pundits writing today do not attempt to do that work either. Generally, they take fragmented data and attempt to draw intelligent inferences.

In this article, I have done this work for you, drawing primarily on data from the Pew Research Group and the General Social Survey. We will look at which groups are growing as a percent of our
population and which groups are not. Both Pew and the GSS have taken surveys over an extended period of time, helping us identify trends in religious affiliation and beliefs.

As you will see, the picture is certainly not rosy, but perhaps better than you expect. Although the growth of non-Christian segments is continuing at a fairly rapid pace, Evangelical Christianity is only declining slightly as a percentage of the population. However, I will point out how some data has been misunderstood to paint either a rosier picture or a gloomier picture than the actual current state of affairs.

**Evangelicals: Thriving or Declining**

All surveys we have reviewed covering this century show the same general result: the percent of people claiming an affiliation with a Protestant or Catholic church has been declining.

GSS surveys\(^3\) found across all ages the percentage who identify as Protestant or Catholic has dropped from 84% of the population in 1988 down to 69% in 2018. Looking only at Protestants (both Evangelical and Mainline), the drop was from 58% down to 46%. Considering those who are Millennials now, that is ages 18 to 34, we find a decline from 53% down to 36% over this thirty-year period. And the data does not show any leveling off in the rate of decline.

But we may ask, “Are Evangelicals participating in this general decline or are they thriving as some authors claim?”

The bottom-line answer is that Evangelicals are declining as a percent of the overall population but at a much slower rate. Across all ages, the percentage who identify as Evangelical has dropped from 30% to 28% over this twenty-year period. For those aged 18 to 34 the drop was from 29% to 25%. In October 2019, Pew released a report showing that from 2009 to 2018, the percentage of Evangelicals of all ages dropped from 28% to 25%, a significantly faster rate of decline.

Even with a slow rate of decline, if Evangelicals make up around 25% of the population, they can have a significant impact on American culture and life and perhaps begin to grow again.

However, does Evangelical affiliation equate to an active Evangelical practice? We need to know how many who affiliate with an Evangelical church are active Christians as opposed to just being affiliated if we want to truly assess the strength of the American Evangelical movement.

Using the GSS surveys, we can look for people who:

1. Know God really exists
2. Pray multiple times per day
3. Attend church at least twice a month
4. Believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and
5. Call themselves a strong Christian

I think an active, evangelical Christian would have these basic beliefs and practices.

The percentage of the population who meet these criteria has dropped from about 9% down to just over 7% of the population over the last twenty years. This result is a large enough group to have some impact but not enough to crow about the growing Evangelical presence. We can say that Evangelical Christianity is certainly not thriving but clinging to a position of some relevance.
What’s Happening with the Nones

Nones are people who state their religious affiliation is either atheist, agnostic or nothing at all.\(^4\) The dramatic growth of the Nones has been an ongoing headline story.

Surveys\(^5\) indicate the Nones were 8% of the population in 1988. By 2018 they had grown to over 23% of the population. For ages 18 through 29, they tripled from 13% to 35% of the population. No one denies this growth, but some question the importance of this trend.

For example, Glenn Stanton states, “(The Nones) are simply reporting their actual faith practices in more candid ways, largely due to new ways in which polling questions have been asked in the last ten years or so.”\(^6\) Oddly enough, he primarily relies on data from GSS for long term trends and they have asked exactly the same question regarding Nones since 1972.\(^7\)

Some suggest Nones are primarily Christians who will return to the fold as they move into marriage and child rearing. Is there any indication that this is happening?

Well, in 2007, among those aged 18 to 32, 24% of them are classified as Nones. In 2014, for this same group now seven years older, 32% of them are Nones. As this group began rearing children, a significantly larger percentage of them were Nones than when they were younger. Also, instead of attending church, only 4% of these Nones attend church more than once a month.

Instead of emerging adult Nones turning into church-attending Christians as they age, more of them are becoming Nones. It appears that the cultural pressures against Christianity are outweighing the tendency of prior generations returning to seek religious training for their children.

The Barna Group has found that there are genuine differences between Millennials and older generations that will not be removed as they age. As Dave Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, states in his book, *UnChristian*,\(^8\) “I would caution you not to underestimate the widening gap between young people and their predecessors. Those who think that in due time Mosaics . . . will ‘grow up’ and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.” Dave’s comment is based on their analysis of multiple surveys covering thousands of individuals and a large number of in-depth interviews with young adults.

Are the Nons THE Major Growth Story?

Is the growth of nondenominational Christians a more important trend than the Nones? Glenn Stanton states, “Growth of nondenominational churches has been many times larger than the nones. . . it is not the rise of the nones that is the major story . . . It’s the “nons” and not the nones that are mushrooming.”\(^9\)

This condition would be an amazing finding if true. However, it is not true for three major reasons which we will discuss today:

1. The percentage growth of the “nons” is *not many times larger*. From 2007 to 2014, “nons” grew their percentage of the population by 44%. But, Nones grew by almost the same rate at 42%. Looking at absolute growth, the “nons” grew by four million people versus the Nones’ 19 million—almost five times the number of “nons.” The growth of the “nons” is relegated to a minor factor when compared to the Nones.

2. The “nons” are a subset of the Evangelicals. And Stanton states, “Evangelicals have benefited more from these ecclesiastical exoduses than anyone else. They even . . . outpaced the
nones.”{10} In fact, most of the “nons” growth came as a result of switching between evangelical denominations. Thus, any growth by the “nons” is offset by declines in other evangelical groups, resulting in an overall decline of about 1%. Evangelicals have not even come close to outpacing the Nones.

In fact, for the first time, we have the total number of nons exceeding the number of Evangelicals in America.

3. Stanton says, “It’s the evangelical churches identifying as nondenominational that have been growing faster than any others including the nons and the atheists.”{11} Taking a look at percentage growth, the atheists and agnostics have shown the most explosive growth by far, growing their numbers from 9 million in 2007 to 17.4 million in 2014—a growth of 92%—while the “nons” grew from 8 million to 12 million over the same time period, a growth of 56%. So perhaps Stanton meant to say, “It’s the non-believers and not the Nones that are mushrooming.”

In summary, the growth of the “nons” may be of interest to those who study the relative make-up of Evangelicals in America. But to those interested in how Evangelicals are doing as a whole it is not relevant. The fact that the “nons” are increasing just reflects some churning of affiliations within the Evangelical realm. On the whole, Evangelicals are decreasing at a slow, but steady pace.

Confusing Expansion with Same-Store Growth

A commercial enterprise may report sales growth. But the savvy investor wants to know why. Opening new stores may increase sales. But if it masks lower sales per existing store, it is a red flag. They are actually losing market share.

Similarly, with parachurch ministries, their number of locations gives little indication as to the health of Christianity. However, their growth rate per location can signal increased interest in Christianity.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often overlooked. For example, one pundit points to impressive growth by two respected student ministries in adding new locations as evidence to support an optimistic projection of Evangelical growth. However, they are not reporting an increased impact on a per site basis.

Looking at their annual reports,{12}{13} we see that one of them reports per location attendance declining at a rate of almost 1% per year over the last decade.{14} The other is declining even faster, reporting a growth rate of negative 3% per year.{15}

These declines could be caused by several different factors such as lower attendance at new locations, competition with other student groups, lower interest in their Christian message, etc. But we can be sure that these two ministries do not indicate an overall growth trend for Evangelicals.

Surveys and statistics can be very helpful in understanding the status of a ministry. However, we can be seriously misled by listening to those who do not know how to interpret the data contained in these sources.

Wrapping up our look at faith trends, in this article we saw:

1. American Evangelicals are declining slightly in the overall population with actively engaged Evangelicals holding about 7% of the population.
2. The Nones continue to grow and now exceed Evangelicals. Their growth clearly reflects the unimportance of religious affiliation among a large percentage of Americans.
3. The growth of Non-denominationals (although interesting) made no impact on the overall size of American Evangelicals and is less than the growth of atheists and agnostics.
4. Looking at growth per location of parachurch ministries is more important than growth in number of locations in assessing the growth of Christianity.

We live in a challenging time but Evangelical churches are strong enough to make a huge difference in America if we will follow the Holy Spirit’s lead and present the eternal truth of the gospel in ways that communicate to today’s “nothing in particular” culture.

Notes

4. Terms used in the Pew Research Surveys; the GSS survey uses None to capture all of those responses and other surveys use variations of these approaches.
5. Ibid.
10. Stanton, p. 28.
11. Stanton, p. 31.
14. The years looked at were 2009 and 2017.
15. For Intervarsity, we looked at 2007 and 2017.

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**God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally**

_ Dr. Michael Gleghorn offers an introduction and overview of Doug Pollock’s book by the same title. Those who want to learn more about how to have natural and effective spiritual conversations are encouraged to read (and apply) Pollock’s book for themselves._

**Creating God Space**
If you’re a Christian, you probably wrestle from time to time with how best to share your faith with non-Christian friends and family. I mean, let’s face it. We often want to share our faith. But we’re a bit confused (maybe even overwhelmed) with how to go about it in a natural and non-threatening way. Is there a way to have spiritual conversations naturally?

According to Doug Pollock, the answer is “Yes”—and it all begins with something he calls “God Space.” “I often wonder,” he says, “what would happen if . . . the body of Christ could create low-risk, high-grace places for people to pursue their need to have spiritual conversations.”{1} But Doug not only wonders about it, he’s also spent the better part of his adult life actually doing it—and training others to do it too. Although he’s had many roles, he’s probably best known for his work as an author, speaker, and evangelism trainer for Athletes in Action.{2} His passion, however, is pointing people to Christ through spiritual conversations in which people have the freedom to simply be themselves.

You see, Doug believes that people actually want (and even need) to have such conversations. Moreover, they’re often even willing to have them. The problem, of course, is that such conversations can often seem intimidating—even threatening—to both Christian and non-Christian alike. So Doug advocates creating a “safe space” in which to have such conversations. But he warns us that for many non-Christians in our world today, the church is often not perceived as safe.{3} Hence, he says, if we want to reach people for Christ, then we’ve got to go to them—and help create a “safe space” for spiritual conversations right where they are.

Doug calls it “God Space”—a space where “God is . . . encountered in . . . ways that address the longings and cries of the heart.” In God Space “the ‘unworthy’ feel safe enough to bring their real selves . . . into the light, and to journey, one step at a time, toward the magnetic pull they sense deep in their souls.” It’s a space where “spiritual curiosity is aroused, and the message of Christianity becomes plausible.”{4}

Does this sound like something you’d be interested in learning more about? Then keep reading as we consider Doug’s book in more detail.

**Spiritual Conversation-Killers**

Doug Pollock offers some great advice about how to have natural, non-threatening spiritual conversations with those who don’t know Christ. Before discussing this advice in more detail, however, we first need to pause and consider some of the ways in which we might unintentionally shut-down, or “kill,” a spiritual conversation before it even has a chance to get going.

Doug describes ten “spiritual conversation-killers” in his book. Although we can’t discuss them all, we’ll at least mention a few of them. To get started, think of the non-Christian people you know and interact with on a somewhat regular basis. How many of them would be interested in having a “low-risk, high-grace” spiritual conversation with you? If your answer is few to none of them, then you might be guilty of the most basic spiritual conversation-killer of them all: “an unbelieving heart.”{5} If we assume that the non-Christians we know aren’t interested in talking about spiritual things, then we probably won’t have many spiritual conversations with them.

And Doug says this is a big mistake. “I’ve had spiritual conversations with people all over the world,”
he writes, “including the supposed ‘tough places.’ I think it’s because the Holy Spirit has given me a conviction that if God has put eternity in every person’s heart, which is what Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us, then all people were made for spiritual conversations.”{6} So let’s not “kill” an opportunity for spiritual conversations because of unbelief. Instead, let’s assume that if we approach such conversations wisely, we’ll find people eager to talk with us.

Okay, so how do we approach such conversations wisely? In my opinion, the best way to have good spiritual conversations is simply to apply some of the very same principles that go into having good conversations of any sort.{7} For example, how well would my conversation go if I was disrespectful of the other person’s beliefs or opinions? Or what if I came across as harsh, combative, or domineering? Would such conversations be successful? Probably not. And if that’s the case with everyday conversations, then it’s probably the case with spiritual conversations too. So if we want to have good spiritual conversations, we need to be humble, gracious, kind, and polite. If not, we’ll probably “kill” whatever spiritual conversations we might otherwise have had. And when that happens, no one wins.

Wondering Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations

In God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally, Doug has four great chapters on noticing, serving, listening, and wondering your way into spiritual conversations. For our purposes, let’s direct our attention to that final chapter, which involves “wondering” our way into spiritual conversations. “Of all the things you’ll read in this book,” Doug tells us, “this chapter holds the most promise if you truly want to see the quality and quantity of your spiritual conversations increase.”{8}

So how does it work? How do we wonder our way into spiritual conversations? As Doug lays it out for us, there are essentially two steps. First, we have to be really good listeners.{9} If we’re not actively listening to what people are telling us, then we’re not going to have much to wonder about. That’s because we wonder our way into spiritual conversations by asking good questions about what another person is telling us. That’s step two. After listening carefully to what the other person is saying, we begin to wonder “out loud” by asking questions that are relevant to the conversation we’re having.{10}

According to Doug, “good wondering questions” will “flow naturally out of your context and . . . conversations.” They reveal “that you have listened thoughtfully.” They “are open-ended and promote more dialogue and reflection.” They “probe sensitively and reflectively into someone’s belief systems.” And finally, such questions encourage “others to investigate the Christian life” for themselves.{11}

So by listening carefully and asking good “wondering” questions about what you’re being told, you can open the door to all sorts of spiritual conversations. Doug even offers some examples of “good ways to start wondering.”{12} Suppose your conversation partner has made an interesting claim or expressed an intriguing perspective on some issue. You might respond by saying, “That’s an interesting perspective; I’m wondering how you arrived at that conclusion?”{13} Notice how such a question not only demonstrates an interest in, and respect for, the other person and their views—it also serves to keep the conversation moving forward in a positive direction. Indeed, once you get a knack for listening carefully and asking good wondering questions, who knows how many spiritual conversations you might find yourself having!

Bringing the Bible Into Your Conversations

Let’s now discuss Doug’s advice about bringing the Bible into our conversations.{15}
The word of God is powerful. Paul describes it as “the sword of the Spirit.” And the author of Hebrews tells us it can “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Indeed, it’s partly because the Bible is so powerful, that we need to be careful about the way in which we bring it into our conversations.

As Doug reminds us, “If people sense you’re trying to use the Bible as an authoritative ‘crowbar’ to beat them into submitting to your viewpoint, your conversation is likely over. However, if you humbly ask for permission to introduce the Scriptures into your dialogue, ‘deep spiritual magic’ begins to happen.” The key point here, of course, is asking for permission. This is important and Doug encourages us to always make a habit of it. After all, if the person has given you permission to share something from the Bible, then they won’t feel awkward or threatened when you do so. And if they haven’t given you permission, then it’s probably better just to wait and pray for a more opportune time.

Okay, that sounds good. But how can we know when it’s right to ask for permission? Here we need a measure of wisdom and even plain common sense. In general, however, when the person expresses an interest in some issue about which the Bible speaks, it might be a good time to ask for permission to share what the Bible says. Doug gives the example of talking with some non-Christian college students about the meaning of love. The students were intensely interested in this topic, but they were having a hard time defining what the word even meant. After discussing the issue for a bit, Doug asked for permission to share what the Bible has to say about love. Having gotten their permission, he directed them to the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13. Primed and ready, the students eagerly listened to what the Bible had to say. Its message had suddenly become relevant to them, for it spoke directly to an issue about which they cared deeply.

If we could learn how to introduce the Bible like that, our non-Christian friends might be more eager to hear what it says. In the next section we’ll conclude our discussion of Doug’s book by considering “missed opportunities” and “burned bridges.”

**Missed Opportunities and Burned Bridges**

We’ve considered several ways to improve our conversations, but it’s easy to make mistakes. So now we’ll consider Doug’s advice about “missed opportunities” and “burned bridges.” Can “missed opportunities” be reclaimed and “burned bridges” be rebuilt? And if so, then how do we do it?

Let’s first consider missed opportunities. Suppose you had a conversation with a neighbor who made a comment that left a wide-open door for spiritual conversation—and you said . . . nothing. We’ve probably all had conversations like this. Maybe the comment caught us off guard, and we just weren’t sure how to respond. Or maybe we felt too tired, or scared, or something else. Whatever the reason, we can “reclaim” such missed opportunities. It’s often not even that hard. Doug tells of missing out on a great opportunity because he just wasn’t sure what to say. About a month later, however, he got another opportunity. He told the person that he’d been thinking a lot about a comment which they had previously made. Intrigued, the person asked what it was—and almost immediately they were right back where they had left off a month earlier!

Okay, that’s the easy one. But what if we didn’t remain silent. What if we said the wrong thing—and now feel like we’ve burned our bridges with another person? Granted, this is more difficult. But Doug throws down a challenge. For once we recognize and admit our mistake to ourselves, we can then confess it to God and bring the issue before Him in prayer. After praying about it, Doug says, we can actually go to the person and let them know that we’ve been thinking about how we “come across” in spiritual conversations. We can even ask if they’d be willing to give us “some honest feedback” about how others might perceive us in this area. And if so, then we can listen carefully
and apologize for any mistakes we might have made. Of course, we can’t predict how the other person will respond. But by taking this approach, we can go a long way toward restoring the relationship.{23}

If you’d be interested in creating some “God Space” for your own conversations, then I encourage you to get (and read) Doug’s book for yourself. I think you’ll be really glad you did.

Notes

2. For more on Doug, check out his website: www.godsgps.com/
4. The citations in this paragraph can be found in Pollock, *God Space*, 20-21.
5. This is “Killer 1” in Doug’s view. See Pollock, *God Space*, 24.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. In what follows, I briefly mention several of the spiritual conversation-killers which Doug discusses on pp. 29-32. Specifically, Doug mentions conversation “killers” like disrespect, control, judgment and combativeness.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. All of the quoted material in this paragraph comes from a section on “Good Wondering Questions” in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.
12. See the examples under this section heading in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.
13. Ibid., 73.
14. This is one way in which Doug likes to refer to non-Christians. See Pollock, *God Space*, 16.
15. See Pollock’s chapter 9, “Bringing the Bible into your Conversations,” in *God Space*, 87-99.
17. Hebrews 4:12 (NASB).
19. Ibid., 93.
20. See the discussion in Pollock, *God Space*, 90-94.
21. Doug discusses this topic in chapter 10, “Reclaiming Missed Opportunities and Rebuilding Burned Bridges,” 100-106.
22. Doug shares this story on pp. 101-103.
23. The citations in this paragraph come from Doug’s discussion on p. 106.

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Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism

In the spring of 2011, Pastor Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins* hit the book stores, but the furor over the book started even before that. The charge was heresy. Bell appeared to be teaching Universalism,
the belief that everyone will be saved in the end. In fact, Bell doesn’t make a case for Universalism in the book, although his rejection of the traditional view of hell makes it seem so at first.

This will not be a review of Love Wins but rather a look at Universalism itself. It won’t do to simply label Universalism as heresy and be done with it. The way people responded to Bell’s book illustrates the problem.\{1\} It’s better to understand why this teaching has been and should be rejected.

It is important to try to represent others’ views fairly. This article, which is what aired on Probe’s radio program, is too short to do Universalism justice; there is way too much involved in it. Here I’ll confine myself to introducing some of the important issues involved. However, a longer article in PDF form is available here to fill out the issue some more.\{2\}

Universalism has been believed by some Christians since the early centuries of the church. What makes it attractive? For one thing, Universalists wonder how a loving God could send people to hell—a place of conscious torment—forever. Furthermore, God is a God of justice, and a punishment of eternal torment seems incommensurate with our finite sins, as bad as they may be.

Universalists find scriptural support primarily in Paul’s writings where he declares, for example, that “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom 5:18).

Before digging in, I need to make an important distinction. I’ll be talking about Christian Universalism, not pluralistic Universalism. Pluralistic Universalism is the belief that everyone in the world will be “saved” by some almighty being or force that the various religions understand in different ways. Christian Universalism, by contrast, is the belief that Christianity holds the truth about God, man, and salvation, and that, contrary to the traditional belief, everyone will be saved through faith in Christ, even if on the other side of the grave.

The Love and Justice in God

Universalists take the traditional view of hell as being completely out of keeping with the loving character of God.\{3\} Philosopher Thomas Talbott believes that, because love is basic to the nature of God, everything God does has a loving aspect. Thus, there can be no eternal judgment against a person.

Because of this, Talbott sees God’s justice primarily as remedial or restorative, not as retributive or punitive. Speaking of Israel, for example, he points out that God “did not spare the natural branches” (Romans 11:21), yet eventually God will have mercy on them. Couldn’t it be the same for the Gentiles, too? God’s grand project since the Fall has been to save people. If He doesn’t save all, hasn’t He failed?\{4\}

Scripture claims both that God is just and that God is love (see Deut. 32:41 and John 4:8). It’s also clear that God administers retributive justice. This is seen in Isaiah 3:11 where God says that what the wicked “have dealt out shall be done to him.” Consider, too, God’s judgment against the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 20:16-17). There is no mention of restoration.
For Universalists, love is supreme; justice serves love. Why not the other way around? Why shouldn’t love serve justice? N. T. Wright asks why either love or justice ought to be seen as the highest expression of God’s nature. Perhaps, he says, both are expressions of God’s holiness.\(^5\)

The cross work of Christ is instructive here. Our hope for salvation rests on the fact that on the cross “He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf” (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:10,12,14; Isa. 53:5). What kind of judgment fell on Christ? It was punitive, not restorative, and it was properly ours.

Still, even with all this, how can we possibly regard everlasting punishment as just? It’s important to understand that judgment isn’t merely a reflection of a sin:punishment ratio. Believing in God in the biblical sense involves both our acceptance of God in all His glory and our submission to Him whatever He may command or promise. Thus, to not believe in God in this full sense is to reject God. So when people will be punished in hell, it won’t be simply a matter of paybacks for individual sins. It will be because they rejected God.

**Paul and Universalism**

In addition to the appeal to the love of God, Universalists often look to the letters of Paul for support. Writes Thomas Talbott, “Unlike most conservatives, I see no way to escape the conclusion that St. Paul was an obvious Universalist.”\(^6\)

Where does he find this in Paul’s letters? Romans 5 and 11 are key passages. In Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam with the second Adam, Christ. In verse 18 he writes, “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” In Romans 11:32 he writes, “For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all.” “All” is taken quite literally to mean everyone tainted by sin.\(^7\) What can we say in response?

Paul’s main point in Romans, with respect to the issue at hand, is that salvation is not just for Jews but for all people, and it comes through faith in Jesus. In chapters 1 through 4, Paul argues that everyone knows God exists but sins anyway and is deserving of punishment. Furthermore, the Jews had no safety net because they possessed the law; they broke the law themselves. Salvation has come through faith in Christ alone. In fact, faith has always been the basis of salvation. Paul sums up in chapter 5: through Adam everyone is tainted by sin; through Christ alone is found salvation for everyone. That he doesn’t mean every single person will necessarily be saved is clear in Romans 11:22. The Jews who will be grafted back in are those who “do not continue in their unbelief.”

Second Thessalonians 1:7-10 is an important passage for understanding Paul’s teaching on eternal punishment. There Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, acknowledges that this is an especially problematic passage for Universalists.\(^8\)

**Jesus and Universalism**

It’s often been noted that Jesus makes the strongest statements on hell in Scripture. Universalists believe they have been misunderstood.
Given that Paul clearly taught Universalism, Thomas Talbott believes, passages such as Matthew 25, where Jesus spoke of separating the sheep from the goats, must be interpreted in that light. Talbott characterizes Jesus’ prophetic teachings as “hyperbole, metaphor, and riddle . . . parable and colorful stories.”

He says that “Had it been Jesus’ intention to address the question of universal salvation . . . in a clear and systematic way, I’m sure he was capable of doing so.” Jesus is simply teaching what would have been our fate were it not for the atonement.

Did Jesus make any clear statements about the finality of judgment? I’ll mention just three passages.

In Matthew chapter 7 we read the severe warning from Jesus that in the end not everyone who claims Jesus as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. “I declare to them,” Jesus said, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (vv. 21-23). There is no mention of a second chance later.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), when those who weren’t prepared knocked on the door and asked to be let in, the bridegroom refused, saying he didn’t know them. One must be prepared or be locked out. There’s no hint of a later unlocking of the door.

In Matthew 25:46, Jesus speaks of “everlasting punishment.” “Everlasting” is the English translation of the Greek word *aiōnion*. Universalists argue that this word refers to an age of punishment because the root word, *aiōn*, means just that—an age with a beginning and an end. But *aiōnion* isn’t just a form of *aiōn*; it is a form of the word *aiōnios* which means “eternal.”

According to the standard Greek lexicon of our day, *aiōnios* can mean, among other things, with a beginning but without an end. One example is when Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for us (Jn. 14:2,3). Paul says that this new home is “eternal in the heavens” (Romans 5:1).

When Jesus speaks of punishment in Matt. 25:46 as everlasting, He means just that. Everlasting life or everlasting punishment; it’s one or the other.

**Postmortem Salvation**

Because obviously not everyone dies in Christ, postmortem salvation is an essential component of Universalism. There must be people saved after death.

There is no direct scriptural teaching about postmortem salvation. The closest is the much disputed passage in 1 Peter 3 where Peter speaks of Jesus making proclamation to the spirits in prison (vv. 19-20). It is not at all clear that the event spoken of in 1 Peter refers to the evangelization of all the lost after death. Theologian and New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem names five possible interpretations of this passage in an article, and says that even more are possible.

Gregory MacDonald believes that Rev. 21:25, which says that the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed, indicates that unbelievers can exercise faith after death and come in. Verse 24 speaks of the kings of the earth entering the city along with the glory and honor of the nations. MacDonald identifies these with the kings defeated earlier with the beast (19:19). They had been enemies; now they are not.

In response, we note that “kings of the earth” is a common designation in Scripture for earthly rulers. It is entirely reasonable to see John, in Revelation, as talking about one group of kings who side with the beast and another group who are part of the kingdom and who enter to bring homage to the King.
The wall around the city marks a boundary between those who may enter and those outside. Outside doesn’t necessarily mean simply outside spatially but can also mean those not included in the circle or group. Those who are able to enter the city are those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life (21:27). No promise is given that a person’s name can be entered after death.

There is no clear promise in Scripture that there will be an opportunity for people to be saved after death. Are we willing to risk the eternal damnation of people by presenting the supposition that there will be? Universalism is conjecture built upon a basic notion of what the love of God must mean. The case built from Scripture, however, is too fragile to sustain it.

This article barely scrapes the surface of this subject. I urge you to look at the longer article, “Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,” also on Probe’s web site.

Notes

1. My comments regarding the hasty reaction to Love Wins are given in a short article on Probe’s web site titled “(Ir)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair.”

2. The longer version, titled “Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique,” is available on Probe’s web site.

3. Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, states that “The love of God is very important for the Universalist. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a strong belief in God’s love that often drives people towards Universalism.” Gregory MacDonald, The Evangelical Universalist (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 100. Note that “Gregory MacDonald” is a pen named used by Robin A. Parry. To reduce the possibility for confusion over book titles and author names, I will refer to him as MacDonald when referencing his book The Evangelical Universalist.


11. Ibid., 45.


13. Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 4:14, John 6:51, 58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:26; and Rev. 22:5. Another reason we know eternal life extends into the future in a
temporal sense is because it is the life of the Son and he has no end (1 Jn. 5:11; cf. Jn. 1:4). We will have life everlasting because Jesus, to whom we are now connected, has life everlasting.


15. See Matt. 17:25; Acts 4:26; Rev. 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9.


17. For other Scriptures on this use of “outside” see Mk. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12f; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12.


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The Rise of the Nones - Reaching the Lost in Today’s America

Steve Cable addresses James White’s book The Rise of the Nones in view of Probe’s research about the church.

Probe Ministries is committed to updating you on the status of Christianity in America. In this article, we consider James White’s book, The Rise of the Nones, Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated. {1} His book addresses a critical topic since the fastest-growing religious group of our time is those who check “none” or “none of the above” on religious survey questions.
Let’s begin by reviewing some observations about Christianity in America.

From the 1930’s into the early 1990’s the percentage of nones in America was less than 8%. But by 2012, the number had grown to 20% of all adults and appears to be increasing. Even more alarming, among those between the ages of 18 and 30 the percentage grew by a factor of three, from 11% in 1990 to nearly 32% in 2012.

Another study reported Protestantism is no longer the majority in the U.S., dropping from 66% in the 1960’s down to 48% in 2012.

The nones tend to consider themselves to be liberal or moderate politically, in favor of abortion and same-sex marriage being legal, and seldom if ever attend religious services. For the most part, they are not atheists and are not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. However, among those who believe in “nothing in particular,” 88% are not even looking for a specific faith or religion.

One report concludes, “The challenge to Christianity … does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religions. They’re not thinking about religion and rejecting it; they are not thinking about it at all.” In fact, the 2011 Baylor survey found that 44% of Americans said they spend no time seeking “eternal wisdom,” and a Lifeway survey found that nearly half of Americans said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

As White notes, these changes in attitude come in the wake of a second major attack on traditional Christian beliefs. The first set of attacks consisted of:

1. Copernicus attacking the existence of God
2. Darwin attacking God’s involvement in creation, and
3. Freud attacking our very concept of a creator God.

The second storm of attacks focuses on perceptions of how Christians think in three important areas.

1. An over entanglement with politics linked to anti-gay, sexual conservatism, and abrasiveness
2. Hateful aggression that has the church talking in ways that have stolen God’s reputation, and
3. An obsession with greed seen in televangelist transgressions and mega-pastor materialism, causing distrust of the church.

These perceptions, whether true or not, create an environment where there is no benefit in the public mind to self-identifying with a Christian religious denomination.

**Living in a Post-Christian America**

A 2013 Barna study shows America rapidly moving into a post-Christian status. Their survey-based study came to this conclusion: over 48% of young adults are post-Christian, and “The influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s
youngest Americans.”{6}

White suggests this trend is the result of “three deep and fast-moving cultural currents: secularization, privatization, and pluralization.”{7}

Secularization

Secularization teaches the secular world is reality and our thoughts about the spiritual world are fantasy. White states: “We seem quite content to accept the idea of faith being privately engaging but culturally irrelevant.”{8} In a society which is not affirming of public religious faith, it is much more difficult to hold a vibrant, personal faith.

Privatization

Privatization creates a chasm between the public and private spheres of life, trivializing Christian faith to the realm of opinion. Nancy Pearcy saw this, saying, “The most pervasive thought pattern of our times is the two-realm view of truth.”{9} In it, the first and public realm is secular truth that states, “Humans are machines.” The second and private realm of spirituality states, “Moral and humane ideals have no basis in truth, as defined by scientific naturalism. But we affirm them anyway.”{10}

Pluralization

Pluralization tells us all religions are equal in their lack of ultimate truth and their ability to deliver eternity. Rather speaking the truth of Christ, our post-modern ethic tells us we can each have our own truth. As reported in our book, Cultural Captives{11}, about 70% of evangelical, emerging adults are pluralists. Pluralism results in making your own suit out of patches of different fabrics and patterns and expecting everyone else to act as if it were seamless.

White sums up today’s situation this way: “They forgot that their God was . . . radically other than man . . . They committed religion functionally to making the world better in human terms and intellectually to modes of knowing God fitted only for understanding this world.”{12}

This combination of secularization, privatization and pluralization has led to a mishmash of “bad religion” overtaking much of mainstream Christianity. The underlying basis of the belief systems of nones is that there is a lot of truth to go around. In this post-modern world, it is considered futile to search for absolute truth. Instead, we create our own truth from the facts at hand and as necessary despite the facts. Of course, this creates the false (yet seemingly desirable) attribute that neither we, nor anyone else, have to recognize we are sinners anymore. With no wrong, we feel no need for the ultimate source of truth, namely God.

If You Build It, They Won’t Come

We’ve been considering the beliefs and thinking of the nones. Can we reach them with the gospel, causing them to genuinely consider the case for Christ?

We are not going to reach them by doing more of the same. Statistics indicate that we are not doing a good job of reaching the nones.

As James White notes, “The very people who say they want unchurched people to . . . find Jesus resist the most basic . . . issues related to building a relationship with someone apart from Christ, . .
Paul had to change his approach when addressing Greeks in Athens. In the same way, we need to understand how to speak to the culture we want to penetrate.

In the 1960’s, a non-believer was likely to have a working knowledge of Christianity. They needed to personally respond to the offer of salvation, not just intellectually agree to its validity. This situation made revivals and door-to-door visitation excellent tools to reach lost people.

Today, we face a different dynamic among the nones. “The goal is not simply knowing how to articulate the means of coming to Christ; it is learning how to facilitate and enable the person to progress from [little knowledge of Christ], to where he or she is able to even consider accepting Christ.”

The rise of the nones calls for a new strategy for effectiveness. Today, cause should be the leading edge of our connection with many of the nones, in terms of both arresting their attention and enlisting their participation.

Up through the 1980s, many unchurched would respond for salvation and then be incorporated into the church and there become drawn to Christian causes. From 1990 through the 2000s, unchurched people most often needed to experience fellowship in the body before they were ready to respond to the gospel. Today, we have nones who are first attracted to the causes addressed by Christians. Becoming involved in those causes, they are attracted to the community of believers and gradually they become ready to respond to the gospel.

We need to be aware of how these can be used to offer the good news in a way that can penetrate through the cultural fog. White puts it this way, "Even if it takes a while to get to talking about Christ, (our church members) get there. And they do it with integrity and . . . credibility . . . Later I’ve seen those nones enfolded into our community and before long . . . the waters of baptism.”

Relating to nones may be outside your comfort zone, but God has called us to step out to share His love.

**Combining Grace and Truth in a Christian Mind**

Every day we are on mission to the unchurched around us. James White suggests ways we can communicate in a way that the nones can understand.

We need to take to heart the three primary tasks of any missionary to an unfamiliar culture. First, learn how to communicate with the people we are trying to reach. Second, become sensitized to the new culture to operate effectively within it. Third, “translate the gospel into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.”

The growth of the nones comes largely from Mainline Protestants and Catholics, right in the squishy middle where there is little emphasis on the truth of God’s word. How can we confront them with truth in a loving way?

The gospel of John tells us, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus brought the free gift of grace grounded in eternal truth. As we translate the gospel in today’s cultural context for the nones, this combination needs to shine through our message. What does it look like to balance grace and truth?
• If we are communicating no grace and no truth, we are following the example of Hinduism.

• If we are high on grace – but lacking in truth, we give license to virtually any lifestyle and perspective, affirming today’s new definition of tolerance.

• On the other hand, “truth without grace: this is the worst of legalism . . . - what many nones believe to be the hallmark of the Christian faith.” The real representative of dogma without grace is Islam.” In a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity, they said that as Muslims, they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.

• Grace is the distinctive message of Christianity but never remove it from the truth of the high cost Christ paid. Jesus challenged the religious thought of the day with the truth of God’s standard. Recognizing we cannot achieve that standard, we are run to the grace of God by faith.

To communicate the truth, we need to respond to the new questions nones are asking of any faith. As White points out, “I do not encounter very many people who ask questions that classical apologetics trained us to answer . . . Instead, the new questions have to do with significance and meaning.” Questions such as, “So, what?” and “Is this God of yours really that good?”

We need to be prepared to “give a defense for the hope that is within us” in ways that the nones around us can resonate with, such as described in our article The Apologetics of Peter on our website.

Opening the Front Door to Nones

The nones desperately need the truth of Jesus, yet it is a challenge to effectively reach them. “Reaching out to a group of people who have given up on the church, . . . we must renew our own commitment to the very thing they have rejected – the church.”{18} The fact that some in today’s culture have problems with today’s church does not mean that God intends to abandon it.

The church needs to grasp its mandate “to engage in the process of ‘counter-secularization’. . . There are often disparaging quips made about organized religion, but there was nothing disorganized about the biblical model.”{19} We all have a role to play in making our church a force for the gospel in our community.

It must be clear to those outside that we approach our task with civility and unity. Our individual actions are not sufficient to bring down the domain of darkness. Jesus told us that if those who encounter the church can sense the unity holding us together they will be drawn to its message.

How will the nones come into contact with the unity of Christ? It will most likely be through interaction with a church acting as the church. As White points out, “If the church has a “front door,” and it clearly does, why shouldn’t it be . . . strategically developed for optimal impact for . . . all nones who may venture inside?”{20} Surveys indicate that 82 percent of unchurched people would come to church this weekend if they were invited by a friend.

One way we have a chance to interact with nones is when they expose their children to a church experience. Children’s ministry is not something to occupy our children while we have church, but is instead a key part of our outreach to the lost nones in our community. “What you do with their children could be a deal breaker.”

In today’s culture, we cannot overemphasize the deep need for visual communication. Almost
everyone is attuned to visually receiving information and meaning. By incorporating visual arts in
our church mainstream, “it has a way of sneaking past the defenses of the heart. And nones need a
lot snuck past them.”{21}

We need to keep evangelism at the forefront. “This is no time to wave the flag of social ministry and
justice issues so single-mindedly in the name of cultural acceptance and the hip factor that it
becomes our collective substitute for the clear articulation of the gospel.”{22}

White clearly states our goal, “Our only hope and the heart of the Great Commission, is to stem the
tide by turning the nones into wins.”{23}

Notes

1. James Emery White, The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously
2. Katherine Bindley, “Religion Among Americans Hits Low Point, As More People Say They Have No
3. General Social Survey conducted over multiple years by the National Opinion Research Center
4. ARIS, “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population”, Trinity College,
commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf.
6. Ibid.
7. White p. 46.
8. White p. 47.
60.
15. White, p. 108.
16 White, p. 114.
17. John 1:15.
20. White, p. 152.
21. White, p. 163.
22 White, p. 180.

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Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.

Spirituality and the Body

As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.\(^1\) I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can’t recall which), but the book didn’t have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: “How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?” How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”?\(^2\)

Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an “epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence . . . .”\(^2\) Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ’s power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a “sense of forgiveness and love for God” or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some “seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit,” or by way of “the presence of Christ in the inner life.” Others argue that it is only through the “power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word,” or “through the communion of the saints.” All of these have value in the Christian life but do not “reliably produce
large numbers of people who really are like Christ.”{3}

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God’s Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, “A ‘spiritual life’ consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God–and with the spiritual order deriving from God’s personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers.”{4} To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a “commitment” or “life-style.” It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must employ the disciplines of spirituality. “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.”{5} Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

Salvation and Life

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I
thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to “learn obedience through the things which he suffered” (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude “not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do.”{6} The center of every human being’s existence is his or her body. We are neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, “to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives.”

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God–here and now in the material world.”{7} By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

**The Disciplines of Abstinence**

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom.”{8} He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.
Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . .” Busyness and superficial activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, “Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort.” Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God’s Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, “When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor.”

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.” Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us. It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn’t mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

Notes
Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

Dr. Michael Gleghorn points out that it is not having doubts about our Christian faith that is an issue, but rather how we respond to that doubt. Attacking this issue from a biblical worldview perspective, Michael helps us understand our doubts and respond to them as an informed Christian.

Help! My Doubts Scare Me!

Have you ever doubted your faith? We all have doubts from time to time. We may doubt that our boss really hit a hole-in-one at the golf course last weekend, or that our best friend really caught a fish as big as the one he claimed to catch, or that the strange looking guy on that late night TV show was really abducted by alien beings from a distant galaxy! Sometimes the things we doubt aren’t really that important, but other times they are. And the more important something is to us, the more personally invested we are in it, the scarier it can be to start having doubts about it. So when Christians begin to have doubts about something as significant as the truth of their Christian faith, it’s quite understandable that this might worry or even frighten them.

Reflecting on this issue in The Case for Faith, Lee Strobel wrote:

For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they’re not sure whether it’s permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester . . . until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.\[1\]

So what can we do if we find ourselves struggling with doubts about the truth of Christianity? Why
do such doubts arise? And how can we rid ourselves of these taunting Goliaths?

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we’ll probably all have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, “Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt.”

Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they’re largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is really inspired by God or that Jesus was really born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, “A faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end.”

It’s Not All in Your Head!

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person’s doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it’s important to realize that “doubt is never a purely intellectual problem.” Like it or not, there’s always a “spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized.” Because of this, sometimes a person’s objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the real reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at a university about the evidence for Christianity. Afterward, a student approached him and said, “I honestly didn’t expect this to happen, but you satisfactorily answered all my objections to Christianity.” The apologist was a bit startled by such a frank admission, but he quickly recovered himself and said, “Well that’s great! Why not give your life to Christ right now, then?” But the student said, “No. I’m not willing to do that. I would have to change the way I’m living, and I’m just not ready to do that right now.”

In this case all the student’s reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn’t want God meddling in his affairs. He didn’t want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person’s intellectual objections to Christianity are rarely the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, “A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God.”

Unfortunately, Christians aren’t immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who’s now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he’s currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he’s disobeying God.

Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we’ll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.
I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

As He came down the mountain, Jesus was met by a large crowd of people. A father had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus’ disciples, but they were not able to cast the demon out. In desperation the father appealed to Jesus, “If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” Jesus answered, “If You can! All things are possible to him who believes.” The father responded, “I do believe; help my unbelief.”{7}

Can you identify with the father in this story? I know I can. Oftentimes as Christians we find that our faith is in precisely the same state as this father’s. We genuinely believe, but we need help with our unbelief. It’s always been an encouragement to me that after the father’s admission of a faith mixed with doubt, Jesus nonetheless cast out the demon and healed the man’s son.{8} But of course no Christian should be content to remain in this state. If we want to grow in our faith and rid ourselves of doubts, what are some positive steps we can take to accomplish this?

Well, in the first place, it’s helpful to be familiar with the “principle of displacement.” As Sue “Archimedes” Bohlin, one of my colleagues, has written:

> The Bible teaches the principle of “displacement.” That is, rather than trying to make thoughts shoo away, we are told to replace them with what is good, true, and perfect (Phil. 4:8). As the truth comes in the lies are displaced—much like when we fill a bathtub too full of water, and when we get in, our bodies displace the water, which flows out over the top of the tub.{9}

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

In addition, we can read good Christian books that provide intelligent answers to some of the questions we might be asking. Great Christian scholars have addressed almost every conceivable objection to the truth of Christianity. If you have nagging doubts about some aspect of your faith, there’s almost certainly a work of Christian scholarship that speaks to it in detail. Finally, we must never forget that this is a spiritual battle. So let’s remember to put on the full armor of God so we can stand firm in the midst of it!{10}

Faith and Reason

How can we know if Christianity is really true? Is it by reason, or evidence, or mystical experience? Dr. Craig has an answer to this question that you might find a bit surprising.{11} He distinguishes between knowing Christianity is true and showing that it’s true. Ideally, one attempts to show that Christianity is true with good arguments and evidence. But Craig doesn’t think that this is how we know our faith is true. Rather, he believes that we can know our faith is true because “God’s Spirit makes it evident to us that our faith is true.”{12}

Consider Paul’s statement in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Since every believer is indwelt by God’s Spirit, every believer also receives the Spirit’s testimony that he is one of God’s children. This is sometimes called the “assurance of salvation.” Dr. Craig comments on the significance of this:

> Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you
are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.{13}

Now this is remarkable. For it means we can know that Christianity is true, wholly apart from arguments, simply by attending to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And this is so not only for believers but for unbelievers, too. For the Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, particularly the sin of unbelief.{14} So when we’re confronted with objections to Christianity that we can’t answer, we needn’t worry. First, answers are usually available if one knows where to look. But second, the witness of the Spirit trumps any objections we might encounter.

Consider an illustration from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Suppose I’m accused of stealing a document out of a colleague’s office. Suppose I have a motive, an opportunity, and a history of doing such things. Suppose further that someone thought they saw me lurking around my colleague’s office just before the document went missing. There’s much evidence against me. But in fact, I didn’t steal the document. I was on a walk at the time. Now should I doubt my innocence since the evidence is against me? Of course not! For I know I’m not guilty!{15}

Similarly, writes Dr. Craig, “I needn’t be shaken when objections come along that I can’t answer.”{16} For my faith isn’t ultimately based on arguments, but on the witness of God’s Spirit.

Stepping into the Light

We’ve seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We’ve also seen that such doubts are never just an intellectual issue; there’s always a spiritual dynamic that’s involved as well. But since we’ll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on the light!

In John 7:17 Jesus says, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” Here, Jesus frankly encourages us to put His teachings to the test and see for ourselves whether He really speaks for God or not. As biblical scholar Merrill Tenney comments, “Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to known truth. Obedience to God’s known will develops discernment between falsehood and truth.”{17} Are we really serious about dealing with our lingering doubts? If so, Jesus says that if we resolutely choose to do God’s will, we can know if His teaching is really from God!

Sadly, however, many of us will never take Jesus up on His challenge. No matter how loudly we might claim to want to rid ourselves of doubt, the truth is that many of us just aren’t willing to do God’s will. But if you are, then Jesus says that “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”{18} In other words, we can know by experience that Jesus is from God, that His teachings are true, and that He really is who He claimed to be!

As Christian philosopher Dallas Willard observes, the issue ultimately comes down to what we really want:

The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find him. Surely find him. It’s the person who wants to know God that God reveals himself to. And if a person doesn’t want to know God—well, God has created the world and the human mind in such a way that he
doesn't have to.{19}

The psalmist encourages us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” {20} If we do, we can know not only that God is good, but also that He exists. And even if we still have some lingering doubts and unanswered questions in the back of our minds, as we surely will, they’ll gradually fade into utter insignificance as we become more intimately acquainted with Him who loves us and who reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son! {21}

Notes
4. Ibid., 326.
5. Craig, Hard Questions, Real Answers, 33.
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, Hard Questions, Real Answers, 35-39.
12. Ibid., 35.
13. Ibid., 36.
16. Ibid., 39.
18. John 8:32.

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The Apologetics of Peter - A Logical Argument for the Deity of Christ

Steve Cable explains how the apostle Peter showed himself to be a master apologist, not the bumbling, brash fisherman he used to be.
Peter – A Leader in Apologetics

How many times have you heard the Apostle Peter portrayed as the brash fisherman whose mouth was always several steps ahead of his brain? According to many sermons, Peter’s life motto may have been “Open mouth, insert foot!” Certainly Peter did not hesitate to speak his mind which sometimes landed him in trouble and sometimes resulted in commendation (Matthew 16:23; Matthew 16:17). I suspect we often focus on Peter’s foibles because we feel that if Jesus could love and use Peter then perhaps there is hope for us as well. Others have been known to say, “I guess I take after Peter” as an excuse for thoughtless words or actions which dishonor Christ.

However, if we look at Peter’s entire life journey as recorded in Scripture, we see a life that set an incredible example of love, zeal, compassion, courage and effective apologetics. Wait a minute! Peter, a leader in apologetics? That field is only for egghead theologians, not an uneducated fisherman like Peter, right?

Yes, absolutely Peter was a leader in this area. Here are several reasons why we can be sure that Peter was a leading apologist for Christianity.

1. Peter recognized the evidence pointing to Jesus as the Christ early on. When others doubted Jesus’ teaching, Peter declared, “To whom shall we go, you (Jesus) have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). As an eyewitness of Jesus’ teaching, signs and miracles, Peter, through the Father’s revelation of His Son, went on to declare, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 6:16).

2. Beginning at Pentecost, Peter took on the role as the primary spokesperson presenting a reasoned argument for the gospel before the Jewish masses, the Jewish authorities and the first Gentile converts.

3. It appears that Peter was the one Paul approached to discuss his theology and arguments for the gospel before Paul began sharing them with the entire Roman world (Galatians 1:18). In his second epistle, Peter equates the letters of Paul with the “rest of Scripture,” giving them his approval as “God breathed” (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1:20-21).

4. Peter is the one that commanded us to be prepared to give an effective, reasoned argument for our faith, introducing the term “apologetics” to our vocabulary as important for every believer as he told the believers in Asia, “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Peter was never shy about taking the lead. If we are to obey this command to be prepared with a reasoned defense, it behooves us to look at the example and teaching of Peter.

In this article, we will examine the apologetics of Peter to help us grow in our ability to give a reasoned defense. Peter was following the example and instruction of his Teacher, Jesus. {1} (For a detailed discussion on Jesus’ example, check out “The Apologetics of Jesus” probe.org/apologetics-of-jesus and other resources at probe.org.)
Peter's Defense – Credible Witnesses for the Gospel

Peter commands each of us to be prepared to give an effective reasoned argument for our hope in Christ. Is it possible that this uneducated fisherman was a master at this craft? Let’s begin our examination of how Peter went about making an argument for the gospel.

I have been greatly blessed by studying Peter’s sermons and testimony in Acts and his letters to the churches in Asia. From that study, we find that Peter focused on five aspects in his comprehensive defense of the gospel:

1. Credible witnesses
2. Compelling evidence
3. Confronting objections with consistent reasoning
4. Changed lives
5. Clear conclusion

Let’s look at each of these aspects in turn to see what we can learn to make us better at giving a reasonable explanation for our faith in Christ.

First, Peter based his argument on the basis of credible witnesses. He pointed his audience to four primary witnesses:

1. The eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life
2. The audience’s own personal knowledge of Jesus
3. The testimony of Scripture
4. The Holy Spirit

Peter and the other apostles were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension. Speaking to a crowd in the temple shortly after Pentecost, he said, “[Jesus’ resurrection is] a fact to which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:15). In Caesarea, he told the Gentile Cornelius, “We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem” (Acts 10:34-48). Much later, writing to the believers in Asia, Peter explains, “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16-17). Multiple eyewitness accounts of an event provide credibility, so Peter points to “we,” not just “me,” in each occasion.

Peter also called upon the experience of his listeners. In his sermon at Pentecost, he points to the signs Jesus did stating, “just as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). In other words, your own experience supports what I am telling you about Jesus.

Peter uses the Scriptures as an important expert witness. In Acts, Peter refers to the witness of the Scriptures nine different times, explaining how the scriptural prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus. He told his listeners, “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:18).

Addressing a Jewish audience, Peter did not have to defend the credibility or accuracy of the Scriptures as you may be compelled to do today. But when he addressed the church in Asia, he wrote, “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Peter 1:19). He pointed out that his eyewitness experience with Jesus gives him even greater confidence in the Scriptures.

Finally Peter highlighted the critical testimony of the Holy Spirit in explaining the miracle of
Pentecost and in front of the Jewish leaders. As he told those leaders, “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32).

At this point, you may be thinking, “I don’t have the advantages Peter had. I am not an eyewitness, the person I am sharing was not around when Jesus was performing signs and miracles, and they also think the Bible is full of myths. I am zero for three when it comes to pointing to credible witnesses.” You may be right, but the principles still apply to us today. Even though you are not an eyewitness, you possess written testimony from eyewitnesses who would not change their testimony even under the threat of death. The Gospels and the letters of Peter and John are eyewitness accounts. And, you are an eyewitness of what faith in Jesus has meant in your own life.

I have a friend who is a retired teacher and volunteer hospital chaplain. A number of years ago, his late wife was in the hospital recovering from a severe internal infection which nearly took her life. When the attending physician came by her room to arrange for her release, she thanked him for her recovery. The physician replied, “Don’t thank me. Thank God.” She responded, “How am I supposed to thank God? I don’t even believe in God.” The physician said, “To find the answer to that question, I would like to give you a prescription. When you get home, read the first three chapters of the Gospel of John.”

When she got home, she was surprised to discover that John was located in the middle of the Bible. She told her husband, “This is strange; shouldn’t I start with Genesis?” But you see, this physician had been asked to give a defense for the hope that was in him and he began by pointing her to an eyewitness. Shortly, after reading these chapters in John, she placed her faith in Christ. Her husband told me that he personally knows of at least thirty people who are now Christians because this physician said, “Don’t thank me. Thank God,” and introduced her to the eyewitness John.

We can also point out that no one refuted Peter when he told this large crowd that they were well aware that God had performed many miraculous signs through Jesus, and the Jewish authorities did not refute it either. We can also call upon the listeners’ own experience with life. They were not around to see Jesus perform miracles, but they did have experience with the futility of sin and the struggle with hopelessness.

In our defense of the gospel, we can point out that there is universal agreement that all of these prophecies fulfilled by Jesus were written hundreds of years before Jesus life. The fact that Jesus fulfilled those prophecies lends credence to both the Scriptures and to Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah. {2}

**Peter’s Defense – Compelling Evidence for the Gospel**

Of course, credible witnesses are not sufficient to make a convincing argument. If the evidence they report is circumstantial or inconclusive the argument is undermined. The testimony of Honest Abe Lincoln would not be very helpful if all he had to say was, “It was dark and I couldn’t really see what happened.” Peter made his argument by honing in on the following compelling evidence for the gospel:

1. Jesus did not live an ordinary life. God attested to Jesus’ special position “with miracles and wonders and signs."

2. Jesus suffered a highly public death by crucifixion.

3. God raised Him up again.
First, the signs Jesus performed lend credence to the possibility of the resurrection. As Peter wrote to the Christians in Asia, “For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’ — and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:17-18).

I have the opportunity to share the gospel with international students who have little prior knowledge about Jesus and Christianity. As we look together at the accounts of Jesus’ miracles, I ask them, “What would your response be if you witnessed these events? What would you think about Jesus?” Usually the response is, “I would want to find out more about him. How is he able to do these things? He is not a normal person.”

The second piece of evidence is essential to the argument. If Jesus did not actually die on the cross, His resurrection is a farce. In every defense, Peter states that we know that Jesus was put to death on a cross (Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39; 1 Peter 1:3; 3:18). Jesus’ crucifixion resulted in real physical death. Jesus did not escape death; he experienced death to pay for our sins. The Jewish leaders did not try to refute Peter’s assertion that Jesus had died on that cross.

The crowning piece of evidence is that “God raised Jesus from the dead” (Acts 3:15). Peter wants his audience to know that this is an indisputable fact. Peter told Cornelius and his household, “[we] ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (Acts 10:41).

Jesus’ resurrection is the heart of the gospel and of any defense of the gospel. Consequently, it is the central theme of Peter’s message. {3}

**Peter’s Defense – Confronting Objections with Consistent Reasoning**

Some Christian speakers suggest that being “fools for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:10) means that we do not need to address objections with logical arguments. This is odd since the person they are quoting, Paul, based his ministry and his letters on giving a rational argument for the Christian faith. Perhaps even more compelling is that the uneducated fisherman, Peter, also confronted objections using logical reasoning. He knew that a good argument addresses both the evidence clearly supporting the conclusion and also any evidence which appears to counter the conclusion.

Let’s look at three specific objections on the minds of his listeners that Peter addressed in Acts and his letters.

The first objection he addressed is the popular notion that the Messiah would come in triumph and in power; certainly not in suffering and death. In his arguments, Peter reminds the listeners that the prophets clearly state that the one who will bring healing and restoration will suffer (Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:11; 1 Pet. 1:10-11; 2:21-24). He told the crowd in the temple, “God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer” (Acts 3:18). He pointed the rulers and the elders to Psalm 118 when he declared, “[Jesus is] the stone which was rejected by you the builders, but which became the chief corner stone” (Acts 4:11).

The second objection is that the Scriptures do not teach the resurrection of the dead. The Jews were looking for a descendant of David who would reign forever as the Messiah. Peter used Psalms written by David to show that the God had revealed that the Messiah would die but not be abandoned to Hades or suffer decay and be raised to sit at the right hand of God (Psalm 16:8-11; 132:11; 110:1).

Later in his life, Peter took on a new objection which was not an issue in his early defense. This third
objection was that Jesus had not returned to the earth as He promised. Peter knew that some scoffers were saying, "Why should we believe that Jesus is going to return? It has been years since His death and the world just keeps going along just as it always has." Peter responds by

1. identifying the false assumption in the scoffers’ argument,
2. providing an important perspective on the question, and
3. explaining the rationale for delaying Jesus’ return.

The false assumption is that God has not dramatically intervened in the past. Peter reminds them that God destroyed human civilization through the flood and the scoffers of that time did not believe God would act against them either.

The important perspective is that God does not view time in the way humans do. “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The rationale is God’s mercy as Peter wrote: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Although you may need to address one of these three specific topics at sometime, the important point is that Peter did not gloss over the objections. He did not just say, “I am an eyewitness. Jesus is the resurrected Messiah. Repent and believe.” He addressed the concerns he knew were on the minds of his audience with consistent rational arguments.

**Peter’s Defense - The Testimony of Changed Lives**

Peter knew that an effective argument for the gospel, for our hope, needs to include visible as well as oral arguments. Peter emphasized current evidence that his audience could experience or observe at that time.

For example, at Pentecost his sermon is in response to the crowd drawn to the spectacle of the disciples praising God in many different languages. He points out that this event is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel. Then the body of his message leads to the point that “[Jesus] has poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

Similarly, in the temple he points to the healing of the lame man as evidence that Jesus is the resurrected Prince of Life (Acts 3:15-16).

In his first letter to the churches in Asia, Peter explains that our purpose as God’s special people is to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). One way we fulfill our purpose is by always being ready to give a reasoned argument for our faith. However, Peter teaches us that it is much more than a verbal or written argument. According to the body his letter, we proclaim Jesus’ excellencies by

1. our excellent behavior,
2. our loving relationships,
3. our response to suffering,
4. our servant’s heart, and
5. our devotion to prayer.

These living arguments are essential elements supporting any effective argument explaining our living hope in Jesus. Peter put it this way: “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who
asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame (1 Peter 3:15-16). A good conscience and good behavior are directly tied to the effectiveness of our defense. Peter also highlights the importance of presenting our argument with gentleness and a genuine concern and respect for the other person as someone created in the image of God and loved by Jesus.

**Peter’s Defense – A Clear Conclusion**

Sometimes we get so enthused about the argument that we forget the purpose. We always want to point people to the fact that they can receive a living hope through faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Peter always kept his conclusion in mind. Let’s look at how he presented the conclusion.

To the crowd at Pentecost, he said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ — this Jesus whom you crucified. . . Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:36-39).

To the crowd in the temple, he said, “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19).

To the Jewish leaders, he proclaimed, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

To Cornelius and his household, he concluded, “through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43).

To the church in Asia, he reminded, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Peter wanted them to understand the importance of Jesus life, death, and resurrection to their eternal future. His clear conclusions invited a response from each individual.

Our examination of the preaching and teaching of Peter has shown him to be a master apologist for the gospel. If we want to follow in his footsteps, we study his example preparing ourselves to give an effective argument consisting of

1. credible witnesses
2. compelling evidence
3. confronting objections with consistent reasoning
4. changed lives, and a
5. clear conclusion.

Then when people say that you are acting like Peter, it should be a testimony to your effective witness for our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Notes**

1. For a detailed discussion on Jesus’ example, check out Pat Zukeran’s “The Apologetics of Jesus,” probe.org/apologetics-of-jesus) and other resources at probe.org.
2. For more resources explaining our confidence in the Bible as a reliable witness, check out Pat Zukeran’s “Authority of the Bible” (probe.org/authority-of-the-bible) and other resources by going to
COVID Conditioning: A Viral Outbreak is (Re)Shaping Us and Our World

Byron Barlowe probes the underlying implications of the global reaction to COVID-19 from a worldview level, asking if we may be being conditioned to accept unbiblical views without realizing it.

You and I are being conditioned, you know that, right? It’s a daily thing. Events and messages work on us, and we need to learn to shape them before they shape us. We must take in the right stuff to counter lies and well-intended overreach.

All of a sudden a universal and ubiquitous mind-and-heart-shaper has hit the world like an alien invasion. The tension and suspense feels like that in the film Signs: sitting in the basement, waiting for green “men” to creep into the boarded-up farmhouse, getting snatches of what’s going on in the outside world through a baby monitor. We are covered over with everything COVID-19 virus: news of it, perhaps even the real effects of it as a sickness. But for most of us the newly-minted mandates by mayors and governors, and social pressures from friends and family stemming from the worldwide reaction is the main reality of our lives as we “shelter in place” and are bombarded with a constant stream of information. It’s ruining investment portfolios—at least for now “on paper”—and skyrocketing the recently record-low unemployment numbers. People are scared for themselves and loved ones since so much is unknown.

How is all this change changing us? Materially, how will shifting norms transform public policy and law, along with our personal beliefs? What will the upending of our economy, civic, and personal lives mean? For folks with secure jobs and schoolchildren, is it simply about getting through a few weeks of downtime and home-work, commonsense hygiene and personal contact avoidance? Or will we be forever stamped with new attitudes and convictions birthed by events beyond our control?

We are Responsible for Our Thoughts and Beliefs

Brain scientists confirm what good pastors, parents, and coaches teach: we can’t necessarily control what we go through, but our reaction to it is up to us. Don’t get “Corona’d”! We can either fall mindlessly into lockstep with what we’re told, or to run this experience through a wise grid and conquer fear and foolishness. Cognitive researcher and Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf emphasizes the power of mental self-control: “As we think, we change the physical nature of our brain. As we consciously direct our thinking, we can wire out toxic patterns of thinking and replace them with healthy thoughts . . . . It all starts in the realm of the mind, with our ability to think and choose—the most powerful thing in the universe after God, and indeed, fashioned after God.”{1}
The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of our Creator God, acknowledged this reality when writing to the first Century Roman church and, by extension, to us today. If he were writing what became Romans 12:1-2 to contemporary folks he may have emphasized an action point first (verse 2) and expanded his words’ scope to entail what early believers took for granted: God as the center of all things. Their worldview, including their view of the universe (cosmology), was hierarchical and infused with “God-ness.” Our temptation to trust in God-optional techno-science and complex government structures would be alien to our ancient Christian brethren. Yet, there were competing views of the way the seen and unseen worlds work, so Paul’s admonition to develop their new Christ-inhabited mind is just as germane today.

It might have read something like, “Do not be conditioned by the world [all that is other-than-God, the cosmos, and anti-biblical realms, including your own self-created view of the world] but be reconditioned by the total upgrading of your mind in a new operating system downloaded by the entrance of the Holy Spirit when you believed. This will help you discern how to use that new mind wholeheartedly, purely serving through your body, which is only fitting and quite pleasing as your service to the Master of created reality, Himself the ‘I Am’ Reality.”

It’s Real for Me Too

I’m not immune from the scare and worry. My smartphone just dinged: my son’s second interview for his first career job set for 90 minutes from now was just cancelled. The recently thriving corporation—a very promising prospect—has frozen all hiring due to COVID-19. On the other line is a daughter who is seeking a low-income service position since her employer has no jobs in the pipeline. Our other daughter, an Intensive Care Unit nurse, feels the pressure of shortages and health risks. She posted a picture of herself in a mask and gown, disease prevention protocols called “Droplet Precautions.” Their medical equipment is inadequate and has to be washed and reused. A friend’s fiancé’s family have all been laid off: dad, mom, and siblings. It’s up to me to regulate my Corona-news intake, take my anxiety to God, and trust him. But I am determined not to be led into fear and one-sided thinking and to help others.

Mind-Conditioning: Words Matter to Our Worldview

Harsh new realities are marked by new verbiage which is always a sign of cultural change and often a signal of improper controlling (“shelter in place,” “social distancing,” “presumptive positive,” “an abundance of caution”). Euphemisms like these mask meanings. In order of appearance, they clearly mean “Stay home, keep apart, we presume that he/she is a carrier, and we are going into high-control mode.” As philosopher Peter Kreeft writes, “Control language and you control thought; control thought and you control action; control action and you control the world.” Are you and I being conditioned to become used to changes we may not want?{2}

In the chaos, those of us with downtime and a biblical view of life need to use it to reflect and speak into a frightened and confused world. In the larger pluralistic community, how we respond collectively and personally will in no small way determine the arc of our future. As Dr. J.P. Moreland says, “Each situation in our lives is an occasion for either positive formation or negative deformation.”{3} Yet, this is not simply a personal matter. We are citizens and need to be active ones.

Basic assumptions about reality—worldview presuppositions we just take for granted—tend to sit like bedrock or sinkholes underneath the foundations of cultures, families, and individual lives. We either don’t know about them or ignore them, especially in hectic times of real or perceived crisis. They’re deep, unseen, and usually of no concern until events unearth them or an earthquake shakes things up. Sinkholes cause collapse. Bedrock stands.
Specific Concerns About Corona-Conditioning

Here are some concerns I have as a teacher of biblical worldview discernment as this worldwide quake rattles on:

*Have we become too beholden to medical science for direction?* Every human life is infinitely precious—a very biblical stance given that we are made in God’s image, that He died for all people, and that He desires for none to perish (Genesis 1:27; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet, how does a society weigh its view of life-value versus the inevitability of sickness and death? Citizens demand a disease-free life without pain and engage in death-avoidance, then take “death with dignity”; the medical establishment pretends it can deliver all that. Can outbreaks like this be allowed to shut down entire economies and render personal freedoms moot? Only if we play along with such pretense. An international obsession with killing it ignores everything else. Will our COVID-19 response cause more harm than good? *How* one answers such concerns, not whether such dilemmas *should* happen, is at issue. Our personal worldviews and collective societal constructs—which we can help change—will determine controllable outcomes. We will not determine uncontrollable.

This is *not* to say that public health decrees are wrong in principle nor to necessarily question at least some of those being decreed in this situation, for example voluntary at-home work and study. *Repeating louder this time: I am not saying a massive and unusual response is bad or wrong in and of itself.* Nevertheless, history is absolute regarding the exercise of such power—it almost never regresses. 9-11 and subsequent one-off attempted terrorist acts put in place onerous rules for air passengers that look permanent. Progress, in this sense, may be regress if it unrealistic and ill-conceived.

Conditioning Reality Itself?

*Is Modern mankind seeking to short-circuit reality and its consequences?* This is the biggest underlying issue. There’s something new in the air: near-unanimous mass morality based in rapidly fueled public opinion further fed by transnational fear. I call it “CoronaVirus Virus.” So far, epidemiologists and medical scientists are calling the shots for a global society. Pundits pump up the hype before we can know. Public peer pressure (along with corporate acquiescence and promotion) guarantee an unquestioning going-along for most people and institutions.

We constantly hear and read the phrase, “It’s just the right thing to do.” This orientation raises the question, “Why is it the right thing to do? What is the moral grounding for that decision?” “The greater good” is the mantra of a *utilitarian* worldview that eventually erases the kind of individual freedom of moral agents which Scripture honors. The people in power decide what is good for all the rest. In a pluralistic society like ours, the privileging of choice was traditionally baked into the very fabric of public policy. Law allows leeway for disputable matters of conscience—at least they did before the advent of “hate crimes” which require God-like knowledge of motives. Such fundamental precepts of liberty have long been eroding. In this new Corona-driven milieu, dictates like government ordered shuttering of businesses and stay-at-home decrees means they may never be fully regained. Let’s at least realize this, even if the calculus of health-risk mitigation over civil liberty wins the day.

Then there’s the prospect of the next pandemic. Some virus is surely incubating for debut next year. Will this draconian level be the new standard of response? How will our economy or that of the world (who often follow our lead) survive under such control?
“What, again, is government’s role?”

Who is pausing even for a moment to ask about various requirements, “Is this a bridge too far?” That leads to the other great concern: the directives from medical science’s mass diagnosis-for-the-world are, of course, implemented by government. But the biblical view of the role of government is pretty much limited to policing and making war. Admittedly, society and hence, government has multiplied in complexity—an unbiblical situation given the limits mentioned—therefore public health and economic interventions are somewhat necessary. Absolutely, there are critical emergency situations and this is one of them. It would be unconscionable to allow an epidemic to spread willy-nilly on its own.

However, again, is anyone hitting Pause to ask how far is too far? One hopes that in retrospect, this crisis engenders a throttling back and overturning of policies that helped us get in this pickle (e.g., Federal Reserve-mandated interventions and supposed fixes which are being implemented again; also, allowing a Communist foreign nation a choke hold on pharmaceutical and medical supply chains to gain the “common good” of cheap goods while caregivers do without). Government solutions for all of life. Did we vote this in? Will we do it again in November?

**Government Tyranny in Sight?**

Most worrisome is a move toward what appears more like a police state. In Jordan, missionaries report that 400 people have been arrested for leaving their apartments. Refugee relief workers cobble together care in an impossible situation. A Kentucky man was kept in his home somehow after he refused to self-isolate (another new term in the popular vernacular)—I don’t know the details. That spooked me. I wish he cared enough to stay away from people, but when it comes down to it, he could be shot in his own neighborhood—presumably on his own property—for leaving. Explain that to your six-year-old. A shelter in place order for all counties surrounding Kansas City is to be enforced by police. Cops deciding to fine or arrest you for leaving your home for other than trips to the doctor, grocery story, or cleaners? Politicians telling us what’s essential may be necessary but seems arbitrary at best. Talk of state borders closing for a sickness? This is a novel consideration, far as I know! Does the Coronavirus rise to the level of a nuclear fallout situation? Is this our shared future? As author and apologist Dr. Ken Boa asks (in a personal email), “Given the nature of interconnectivity in a digital world, we now live within plausible sight of a fear-induced technological plague that could lead to a totalitarian outcome.”

**Choices, Not Conditioned Responses**

Again, all I am asking is, “Does the necessity of this drastic a world-changing meta-response go without saying? Could a relatively restrained response now be wise—despite the public relations suicide of facing a sometimes mad mob morality?” On the other hand, “Is freedom—economic and cultural—worth more lives? Whose feet would that be laid at? Politicians? The medical establishment (they are simply doing their calling)? Fate’s? God’s?”

If the choice is between saving every possible life and forever changing life itself for earth’s entire population, where is the middle ground and how does a society find it? That boat has sailed, I fear. Relativistic, ever-changing ideals and their progressive promotion have won the day. The mindset of “We are going to win this thing, no matter the cost!” reigns triumphant in headlines.

There’s a worldview at work—learn to notice it: note the irony of a Postmodern relativism entwined with a Modernist certainty regarding mankind’s ability to control what used to be called an “act of God.” That’s what the highly moralistic and humanistic John Mauldin is unabashedly promoting, I believe. One more mass-mediated call to controlling an out of control universe. As if we could.
Be At Peace, Christian, And Spread That Peace

For individual believers, a biblically realistic and optimistic response is to shelter in place (“abide in Me”). Rest in the peace and assurance of a loving, sovereignly overseeing Creator who will make all things right someday, whose agenda is being met. The best outward response toward unbelievers is to share not only the certainty of that hope, but the gospel that leads to hope in a disease-free, worry-free, perfectly functional and loving society of brother and sisters in Christ. Eternal perspective is the conditioning we must seek. Because we’re all being conditioned. It is truly a daily thing.

Meanwhile, pray for the individuals in charge and their decision-making to be sound. As a new normal reconditions minds and hearts around the globe at the speed of Internet connections, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed” by the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2).

Notes

1. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, p. 20, emphasis mine.

Biblical Archaeology

*Kerby Anderson provides an update on recent archaeological finds that corroborate the historicity of the Bible.*

One of the most important proofs for the historical accuracy of the Bible can be found in archaeology. Ancient history and archaeology should confirm the accuracy of this record. That is what we find when comparing these finds with the written record of Scripture.

My focus will be to summarize a few of the past archaeological finds that confirm the Bible and then provide an update on some of the newest archaeological discoveries made in just the last few years that are very significant. On the Probe website, we have an excellent summary done twenty years ago of archaeology and the Old Testament (probe.org/archaeology-and-the-old-testament/) and archaeology and the New Testament (probe.org/archaeology-and-the-new-testament/).

Archaeology not only has confirmed the historical record found in the Bible, but it also provides additional details not found in the original writings of the biblical authors. Archaeology also helps explain Bible passages by providing context of the surrounding culture as well as the social and political circumstances.
We must also admit the limitations of archaeology. Although these archaeological finds can establish the historical accuracy of the record, they cannot prove the divine inspiration of the Bible. Also, we must admit that even when we have an archaeological find, it still must be interpreted. Those interpretations are obviously affected by the worldview perspective and even bias of the historians and archaeologists.

Even granting the skeptical bias that can be found in this field, it is still amazing that many archaeologists acknowledge the biblical confirmation that has come from significant archaeological finds.

Dr. William Albright observed, “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition.” {1}

Archaeologist Nelson Glueck and president of Hebrew Union College concluded, “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of Biblical description has often led to amazing discoveries.” {2}

Millar Burrows, Professor of Archaeology at Yale University, remarked that “On the whole, however, archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the Scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine.” {3}

**Old Testament Archaeology**

There are so many significant archaeological finds that confirm the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. Perhaps the most famous and most significant find is the Dead Sea scrolls. A young shepherd boy found the first of them in a cave in 1947. Eventually over 800 fragments were found. This includes a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah.

Many of these scrolls are from before the time of Jesus Christ. That is important because it provided a way to check the accuracy of the transmission of the Old Testament. The earliest copies of the Old Testament that we had before this discovery were a thousand years later. When we compare the Dead Sea scrolls to these later manuscripts, we can see that there were very few variations (mostly due to changes in spelling or grammar). The transmission through the scribe was very accurate.

Another significant find was archaeological documentation of King David. Archaeologists working at one site uncovered an inscription that means “house of David” that dates to the ninth century BC.

Another important archaeological find was the Hittite nation. The Hittites are mentioned nearly 50 times in the Old Testament, but there was no solid archaeological evidence they existed until the 20th century. Some argued that the Bible must be wrong since it mentions this nation but archaeological evidence was lacking.

The Hittites were a major force against the Jews. Israel needed to conquer them in order to enter the Promised Land (Joshua 11:3-4). King David had Uriah the Hittite killed because of his adultery with his wife, Bathsheba (2 Kings 11:3-21). Fortunately, archaeologists did uncover abundant evidence of the Hittites in Turkey. They found a temple, sculptures, a storeroom with 10,000 clay tablets. Later they even uncovered the Hittite capital city of Hattusha.

Archaeologists with the Israel Antiquities Authority digging at Tel Lachish found an ancient toilet
that confirms Old Testament history. To understand its significance, we need to look at the record of King Hezekiah. We read in 2 Kings that he removed the Asherah poles from the high places and smashed the sacred stones that were used in the Canaanite cultic worship.

Archaeologists discovered large rooms that appear to be a shrine where four-horned altars were destroyed. They also found a seat carved in stone with the hole in it that was used as a toilet. It was mostly likely placed there as a form of desecration for the whole room. This correlates with the biblical description in 2 Kings 10:27 that Jehu and his followers “demolished the pillar of Baal, and demolished the house of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day.”

**New Testament Archaeology**

Jesus spent much of his time in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. It is mentioned 16 times in the New Testament. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of the fishing industry there (anchors, fishhooks), which would have been used by many of the disciples. The houses were one-story buildings, with roofs of wooden beams or branches. This explains how men carried a man to the roof and let him down in front of Jesus (Mark 2:1-4). Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21-22, Luke 4:31-36). The remains of a synagogue built in the 4th century sits atop the black basalt foundations of this the synagogue that existed at the time of Jesus.

In Jerusalem are many archaeological discoveries from the time of Jesus. That includes the remains of the temple as well as the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15) and the pool of Siloam (John 9:1-7).

Archaeology (as well as history) verifies the existence of many political leaders mentioned in the New Testament. A Denarius coin shows a portrait of Tiberius Caesar. This is also significant because Jesus asked the people whose likeness was on the coin (Mark 12:17). The name Pontius Pilate was found in an inscription at Caesarea Maritima.

Sometimes archaeology can shed light on what seems like a sharp disagreement in the Bible. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he recounts what he said to Peter who stopped eating meals with gentile Christians. He argued that Peter lived like a Gentile even though he was a Jew.

The answer lies in the fact that Paul was a devout Pharisee, who took kosher food laws and purity very seriously. Peter, though Jewish, was not a Pharisee and grew up in Bethsaida on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Archaeological excavations uncovered some non-kosher evidence. Some were eating wild boar and catfish, which were considered unclean and not to be eaten by Jew following the Torah.

Archaeological finds at Corinth include the city’s *bema* seat, where Paul stood trial (Acts 18:12-17) and an inscription with the name Erastus, a city administrator who was an associate of Paul (Acts 19:22; 2 Timothy 4:20; Romans 16:23).

Critics have challenged the historical record of Luke because of alleged inaccuracies. Classical scholar Colin Hemer documents that Luke is a very accurate historian. He identifies 84 facts in the Book of Acts that have been confirmed by historical and archaeological research. This includes nautical details, names of gods, designation of magistrates, and proper names and titles.

These are just a few of the archaeological discoveries in the past that have confirmed the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the next section we will look at some of the most recent archaeological discoveries.
Recent Archaeological Discoveries

Within the last few years, there have been major archaeological discoveries that further confirm biblical history. An article in *Christianity Today* provides a list of the top ten archaeological discoveries. Here are just a few of these important discoveries.

The Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of a limestone column on which the world “Jerusalem” was spelled out in Aramaic. This is the oldest inscription of this nature found so far. You might expect that there would be lots of such inscriptions, but that turn out to be very rare.

The inscription was found in an ancient potter’s village that must have served pilgrims making their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. A potter’s field calls to mind the one bought by the priests (Matthew 27:7) with the money Judas returned.

The Jewish tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were located for a time in Shiloh. Excavation there produced a clay pomegranate. In the Bible, the pomegranate was a common temple decoration (1 Kings 7:18; 2 Kings 25:17). Small pomegranates embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet yarns hung from the hems of the priestly robes (Exodus 28:33). This discovery affirms the sacredness of Shiloh.

Scientists and archaeologists believe they made have found the site of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. They found evidence that a “high-heat” explosive event north of the Dead Sea wiped out all civilization in the affected area. It killed all the people within a 25-kilometer circular area. The fertile soil would have been stripped of nutrients by the high heat. Waves of briny salt would have washed over the surrounding area and spread through hot winds.

The scientists suggest that a cosmic airburst event from a meteor was the reason for the disappearance from the site. It apparently took 600 years for the region to recover before it could once again be inhabited. This fits with the description in Genesis 19, which says that burning sulfur rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah and killed all the people and all the vegetation of the land.

Archaeologist Dr. Stephen Collins says that there was a violent conflagration that ended occupation at the site. There is “melted pottery, scorched foundation stones, and several feet of ash and destruction debris churned into a dark gray matrix as if in a Cuisinart.” He and another author in a joint paper conclude that all of this provides “signs of a highly destructive and thermal event that one might expect from what is described in Genesis 19.”

Recent Archaeological Discoveries

Above we looked at a few of the most recent archaeological discoveries that confirm the historical accuracy of the Bible. Most of them were found in an article in *Christianity Today*. Here are a few more significant discoveries.

An inscribed piece of limestone discovered in a tomb along the west bank of the Nile was revealed to be a Semitic abecedary (alphabet in ABC order). It dates back to the time of Moses and fits with the statement that “Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said” (Exodus 24:4). It turns out he wasn’t the only one writing in a Semitic script in Egypt at that time.

When ISIS terrorists captured Mosul, they blew up the tomb of the prophet Jonah. This uncovered the remains of a palace of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon. Previous archaeological teams stopped
digging in certain sites in Iraq for fear of destroying them. That was a case of the traditional tomb of Jonah, until ISIS started digging beneath it to find artifacts to sell. As one article put it, "ISIS Accidentally Corroborates the Bible."\{9\} The tunnels they dug revealed a previously untouched Assyrian palace in the ancient city of Ninevah. Inscriptions found in the old city of Nineveh give an order of Assyrian kings that matches perfectly with the biblical order.

Extra careful processing of dirt from an archaeological dig in the southwest corner of the Temple Mount provided a beka weight. This was used (Exodus 38:6) to measure the silver in the half-shekel temple tax that was collected from each member of the Jewish community.

Another seal impression seems to be (a letter is missing) the name “Isaiah the prophet.” It was found near the Temple Mount near another seal impression that says “King Hezekiah of Judah” that was uncovered two years earlier. Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah are mentioned in the same verse 17 times. This clay seal gives the impression that Isaiah had access to the king’s palace as his adviser.

A ring with the name “Pontius Pilate” on it was excavated decades ago but only could be read recently due to advanced photographic techniques. Of course, this is not the first time that his name has surfaced in archaeology, but it is still a significant find. The ring is not fancy enough to have been worn by Pilate. It was probably worn by someone authorized to act on his authority and would use it to seal official communications.

This is an exciting time for archaeological investigation. New finds provide even more evidence of the historical accuracy of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Archaeology has provided abundant confirmation of the Bible.

Notes


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