

# Christ and the Human Condition

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.*



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that “man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Whether it’s the trouble that befalls us as we’re simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer’s and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned

to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.[\[1\]](#)

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

## Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history,

bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, “The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man’s depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God.”[\[2\]](#) Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God’s wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ “who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we’re told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is “accursed of God” (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became “a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as we are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

## Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and

theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."[\[3\]](#)

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."[\[4\]](#) Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.[\[5\]](#) And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old

order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

## Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an “enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.[\[6\]](#) Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an “enemy,” but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. “The last enemy that will be abolished,” he writes, “is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.[\[7\]](#)

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther

struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.[{8}](#) Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

## The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as "an incommensurable good."[{9}](#) By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an "incommensurable" or "immeasurable" good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). He understood that "intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately good-for created persons."[{10}](#)

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He

famously wrote that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a “momentary, light affliction”? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. “He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God.”[\[11\]](#)

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis wrote, “In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised.”[\[12\]](#) Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

## Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ’s coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, “The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis” (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.



8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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## No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic

*Rick Wade uses the faulty arguments in Sam Harris' book Letter to a Christian Nation to show why Christians don't have to be afraid of the new atheists' assault on our faith.*

### Getting Started

Sometimes we Christians shy away from books which attack our beliefs because we're afraid we can't answer the objections. That's understandable. Often the authors of such books carry impressive credentials. It's easy to feel intimidated.

Another response which is the opposite of fearful avoidance is haughty dismissal. Sometimes we act as if our position is so obviously true that others can be dismissed as downright stupid and hardly worth bothering with. Even if the opponents' arguments *are* bad, that's no reason to adopt an arrogant attitude. It's especially bad when the dismissive Christian





hasn't even bothered to read the book!

A better response, I think, is to use such occasions to grow in understanding and to exercise one's apologetic "muscles" by working at answering the challenges posed. So, for example, when a doctrine is challenged, by studying the subject, we grow in our knowledge of Christian beliefs and (here's the uncomfortable part) we are sometimes corrected in our understanding. Another advantage is preparation for real face-to-face encounters with critics. Responding to arguments in a book means there isn't the pressure of a person staring at you, waiting for an answer (and fully expecting one; critics do have such a high view of us!).

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a Christian Nation* to give some suggestions about what to look for in such books.[{1}](#) I won't try to address every challenge. Others have given more extensive responses.[{2}](#)

I titled this essay "No Reason to Fear" for a good reason. The challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

Of course, we can't always answer seemingly good objections, and certainly can't answer them all to the atheist's satisfaction. I'll go further than that. I don't think we *have* to answer every objection. There will always be objections. But it's as intellectually wrong to drop one's convictions because of a few unanswered criticisms as it is to hold to such convictions for no reason at all. Atheists obviously don't abandon their beliefs so easily, and they shouldn't expect us to either.

# Fallacious Arguments

If we're going to engage books like *Letter to a Christian Nation* responsibly, we have to be ready to hear some good criticisms of our beliefs or actions. We have to accept the fact that there are some hard things to deal with in our beliefs, especially the problem of evil. We need to admit our inability to give satisfying answers to all objections if we're going to expect that kind of openness from critics. Also, it is often Christians who come under attack rather than Christianity. Harris spends a lot of time here. Christians have done some bad things, and they need to be acknowledged.

More to the point for this article, Christians can sometimes give bad arguments for what they believe. I'm not suggesting that we have to bow to all the demands of skeptics; there are several theories of the proper use of evidences and logical arguments and personal experience, and some formulations are unreasonable. It is to say, however, that we must use good reasoning when we make a case.

The problem with using poor reasoning is that it undermines one's case. That's what we find in Harris's book, and that will be our focus here. When we read a case for a particular belief, we should keep a lookout for such things as questionable assumptions, logical fallacies, and incorrect facts. Harris's book is plagued with fallacious arguments, a surprising turn since he presents his side as being that of reason. So I'm going to spend most of my time on those and mention the other things when appropriate.

Don't let the term "logical fallacies" put you off, like they're things only specialists can understand. It's just another name for poor reasoning. So, for example, if you make the claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and someone responds that you only believe that because you grew up in a Christian nation, you could cry "Foul!" You're making a universal claim; where you're from is irrelevant. If it's

true, it's true in India and China and the US and everywhere else, too. This is a kind of fallacy of false cause. No one is a Christian because he lives in a Christian nation. We are Christians because we have believed Jesus' claims that are universal. It also reflects the current mood according to which religions are human constructs, and Christianity is just one such religion among many.

Although fallacious arguments can have *psychological* force (when we don't spot them and they seem correct), they have no *logical* force. Their conclusions should not be believed.

## Are We Really So Evil?

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells us that "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible."[\[3\]](#) Well, *that's* a surprise! Not that Christians have done bad things, but that such acts are *theologically defensible*! Such things are sanctioned by God because He, too, does such things. Harris accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

But Harris is guilty of this picking and choosing himself. He commits the fallacy which is called the *neglect of relevant evidence*. To be fair, he does note that "it is undeniable that many people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings."[\[4\]](#) But he doesn't bother listing them. He gives no space to the great work done by Christians in the fields of medicine, literacy, agriculture, famine relief, etc. He ignores the good work of organizations like Mercy Ships which takes life-changing medical help to people in third world nations in the name of Christ.

Well, he doesn't completely ignore missionary efforts. One of his favorite rants is against the evils perpetrated by missionaries. They waste time preaching about such things as the virgin birth when there is important work to be done. The most memorable accusation is when he charges missionaries who preach against the use of condoms with "genocidal" piety![\[5\]](#) "Genocidal!" Maybe a little exaggeration there? (And, by the way, while it's true that Christian medical missionaries do present the gospel to people—which they should, since one's eternal life is more important than one's temporal life—I've never heard of any who withhold medical help from people in need until they first preach a sermon on the virgin birth.)

In another place Harris commits the fallacy called *causal oversimplification*. As he sees it, religion is the cause of conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries. Religion is so unnatural and wrong-headed to atheists, that it becomes an easy target for casting blame.

I'm going to give a bit more space to this charge since it's a very popular one these days.

In 2004, the BBC published what it called a "War Audit" which was conducted to determine how significant religion has been in war, at least in the last century.[\[6\]](#) In the article "God and War: An Audit and an Exploration," authors Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen report that

at a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

They continue:

After reviewing historical analyses by a diverse array of

specialists, we concluded that there have been few genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars from 1948 to now, often painted in the media and other places as wars over religion, or wars arising from religious differences, have in fact been wars of nationalism, liberation of territory or self-defense.

Regarding Islamic terrorism, the authors write:

The Islamist fundamentalist terror war is largely about political order in the Arab countries, and the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia. It is not about religious conversion or a clash of religions. Nevertheless, bin Laden claims a religious duty in executing the war. . . .

It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

We need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars over religion.

The authors—or as they call themselves, compilers—of this article include tables which give death tolls in different categories of wars. The writers say that the tables

show that the overwhelming majority of wars and the overwhelming majority of the victims of such wars cannot be classified primarily according to religious causes or religious beliefs. There have been horrific examples though where particular communities have been *targeted because of their religious faith* [italics mine], and these atrocities have been perpetrated by the three most 17 vicious and blood-thirsty regimes ever to hold power: Stalin's Russia, Mao's China and Hitler's Germany.

It's interesting that Harris tries so hard to make religion a source of violence when, as this report indicates, it is often

the religious who are targeted by violence.{7}

## A Few More

Sam Harris's book is titled *Letter to a Christian Nation*, not simply because he's against Christianity. He wants all religion to come to an end. It just happens that Christianity is the most prominent religion in America. Because he lumps all religions together, he can smear Christianity with the evils of Islam by implication.

This is a fallacy. It's called the fallacy of *over-generalization* (or *converse accident*). If evil is done in the name of Islam, and Islam is a religion, then every religion is prone to evil. Thus, what counts against Islam counts against Christianity, too. (If one is reluctant to group Christianity with other religions, then one might see here the fallacy of *faulty comparison*, or what is more commonly called "comparing apples to oranges.")

Another argument Harris presents employs a fallacy we've already discussed, the fallacy of *causal oversimplification*. Harris commits this fallacy when he tells us that "the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity." {8}

The reality of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages cannot be denied. However, Harris's evaluation is simplistic. It is very easy to narrowly focus on the very real anti-Semitism of Christians and ignore other very significant factors. For example, Harris fails to tell us that the Jews were persecuted quite apart from Christianity and even before Christianity came into existence. For example, serious tensions between the Jews and the Greeks of Alexandria in the first century B.C. spilled over into the next century. Things got so bad that Jews were forced to live in one section of the city. Their houses were broken into and looted. Synagogues were burned,

and women were dragged to the theater and forced to eat pork. Historian H. I. Bell reports that “men, women, and even children [were] beaten to death, dragged living through the streets, or flung on to improvised bonfires.”[{9}](#) He also ignores the shift from religious persecution to racial persecution which occurred in the nineteenth century, notably in Russia.

Of course, this doesn't prove that Hitler *didn't* get his anti-Semitism from Christians; but it *does* mean that one should not immediately assume that Christian prejudice is at the root of anti-Semitism. There have been other causes as well. A significant factor in Hitler's hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.[{10}](#)

Although some people already believed in the inferiority of some races, and although Darwinism wasn't Hitler's sole inspiration, Historian Richard Weikart writes, “Darwinism was a central, guiding principle of Nazi ideology, especially of Hitler's own world view.” Weikart quotes Richard Evans, a historian at Cambridge University: “The real core of Nazi beliefs lay in the faith Hitler proclaimed in his speech of September 1938 in science—a Nazi view of science—as the basis for action. Science demanded the furtherance of the interests not of God but of the human race, and above all the German race and its future in a world ruled by ineluctable laws of Darwinian competition between races and between individuals.” Weikart continues: “This is not a controversial claim by anti-evolutionists, but it is commonly recognized by scholars who study Nazism.”[{11}](#)

## A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

One of the questionable assumptions in *Letter to a Christian Nation* is Sam Harris's assertion that “there is no question



that human beings evolved from nonhuman ancestors.”[\[12\]](#) Of course, there is indeed a question about this, a question raised by highly educated scientists easily as qualified as Mr. Harris.

It’s no wonder, really, that Harris makes such bold statements. He is prevented from allowing the possibility of divine creation by his basic worldview commitments. He admits that he doesn’t know why the universe exists, but he’s confident there’s no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. What evidence or reasons does he give for it? Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are based solely on the “trinity” of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them.

One of the (potentially!) maddening things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn’t really a belief; that there shouldn’t even *be* the word “atheism.”[\[13\]](#) Although “atheism” has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn’t the belief that there is no God; it’s simply an absence of belief in God.[\[14\]](#) It’s a kind of “default” position, a “zero” belief, where everyone should be until given sufficient reasons to believe in God. Thus, the atheist has nothing to defend or prove.

But really, folks. Who’s going to believe that atheists are belief-less about God, that they don’t actually believe that there is no God? It’s astonishing the effort they put forth in arguing against religious belief if indeed they have no belief at all.

However, we can go back and forth with atheists about whether they truly deny the existence of God, or we can let that stand and simply ask what they *do* believe about ultimate reality,

for surely they believe *something*. It's simply false to assume that atheism is some kind of zero belief, that it involves no metaphysical commitments. If one denies God, one must have some other view about ultimate reality. Naturalism is a metaphysical position, and it has serious problems of its own.<sup>{15}</sup> If Christians are responsible to give good reasons for their belief in Christian theism, naturalistic atheists must give reasons for their naturalism.

Sam Harris speaks as a voice on high, shouting down to us poor, ignorant people who are stuck in our absurd religious beliefs. It's hard to imagine anyone with thoughtful convictions changing his or her beliefs based on this book. He's preaching to the choir. Now that you have a few tips on what to look for, you might want to take a look at the book, and hear the rest of the "sermon."

## Notes

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Douglas Wilson addresses many of Harris's arguments in his *Letter from a Christian Citizen* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007) and Ravi Zacharias does the same in *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
3. Ibid., 22.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid., 33-34.
6. Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, "God And War: An Audit & An Exploration," <http://tinyurl.com/a2tpb>.
7. For more on this subject, see also Don Closson, "The Causes of War," Probe Ministries, 2008, [www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/](http://www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/).
8. Harris, *Letter*, 41.
9. H. I. Bell, "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 31. (1941), pp. 1-18.
10. Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary*

*Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

11. Richard Weikart, "Re-examining the Darwin-Hitler Link," The Discovery Institute, [http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/02/reexamining\\_the\\_darwinhitler\\_1.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/02/reexamining_the_darwinhitler_1.html).

12. Harris, Letter, 71.

13. Ibid., 51.

14. See Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, (Temple University Press, 1990), 463.

15. See Norman Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), chap. 11.

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# The Bible: Intentionally Misunderstood (Radio Transcript)

*Steve Cable examines the faulty reasoning and interpretation of the Bible in Kurt Eichenwald's Newsweek article "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin."*

## Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar, Dr. Daniel Wallace, addressing our strong confidence in our modern translations, mentioned others presenting a false view of this situation. One example, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin* by Kurt Eichenwald<sup>[1]</sup>, appeared in *Newsweek*. This article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let's evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped

in sharing the truth.{2}

Eichenwald begins by parroting negative stereotypes about American evangelicals. Adding rigor to his rant, he states, “A Pew Research poll in 2010{2} found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with **the New Testament and Jesus’s teachings.**”{4}



He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve answered correctly. However, only **two of the twelve related to the New Testament** and **none to Jesus’s teachings.**{5} Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone’s knowledge of the New Testament, But, for the record, the two questions were “Name the four gospels” and “Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?” 53% of those professing to be born again answered these correctly versus 20% of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a “smidgen higher” must mean almost three times as many.

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Dr. Wallace and others, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today’s translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today’s popular translations{6} and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling in Mark).

He also lists three short passages, claiming they did not appear in earlier Greek copies. Upon examination, we find that one of those passages does not appear in modern translations. The other two do appear in the translations. Why? Because they appear in numerous early Greek manuscripts.{7} Once again his scholarship is found wanting.

All scholars agree there are variations between

ancient manuscripts from different areas but they do not change the message. As Wallace points out, “We are getting closer and closer to the text of the original. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world. If we have to be skeptical . . . , that skepticism . . . should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature.”[\[8\]](#)

## Supposed Biblical Contradictions

Eichenwald continues attacking the Bible with nine different topics he claims reveal contradictions in the biblical record. Let’s examine three of them to see if his arguments have substance.

**First**, he claims there are three different creation models, stating that “careful readers have long known that the two stories of Genesis 1 and 2 contradict each other.”[\[9\]](#)

However, a clear-headed examination sees chapter 1 describing the overall creation while chapter 2 talks about the creation of Adam and Eve. As commentators explain, “what follows Genesis 2:4 is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment.”[\[10\]](#)

In his third creation model “the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab.”[\[11\]](#)

Reading the relevant verses shows no creation story but rather the creature Rahab representing Egypt. Job 9:13 says “under (God) the helpers of Rahab lie crushed.” Some speculate this could relate to the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this speculation were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this reference tells us God destroys all idols raised up by others.

Eichenwald's claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

**His second claim** states the Gospel of John was written "when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus's death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews,"[{12}](#) implying the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans.

Examining his claim, in Luke we read, "The chief priests . . . were trying to find some way to execute Jesus." While the Roman governor did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death.[{13}](#) In Acts, Peter squarely places the responsibility onto the Jewish leaders and nation.[{14}](#) We find similar verses in Matthew[{15}](#) and Mark[{16}](#). All the gospels place the blame on the Jewish nation. There is no shift in perspective in John.

**In a third** supposed contradiction Eichenwald writes, "As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there."[{17}](#)

The gospel of Matthew ends saying **nothing** about Jesus ascending to heaven. In Acts, Luke says the Lord was with His disciples over a forty-day period and could have easily traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee and back.

Not surprisingly, his other six so-called "contradictions" all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

## Faulty Interpretation Part 1

Eichenwald wants to show that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended. He begins by pointing out "the word homosexual didn't even exist until . .

. 1,800 years after the New Testament was written . . . these modern Bibles just made it up.”{18}

But this could be said of many English words used today. A respected dictionary of New Testament words{19} defines the Greek word he questions as “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite. . .”

He then tells us not to trust 1 Timothy when it lists homosexuality as a sin because “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy.”{20}

The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars{21} do not agree it is a forgery.{22} Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood.

He claims people are not banished for other sins such as adultery, greed, and lying.

But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart.{23} Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “plenty of fundamentalist Christians who



have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus.”{24}

Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew the details of Leviticus.

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

## Faulty Interpretation Part 2

To strengthen his position on homosexuality, Eichenwald calls out “a fundamental conflict in the New Testament – arguably the most important one in the Bible.”{25} As Christians, are we to obey the Mosaic Law or ignore it?

He claims, “The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, . . . to achieve salvation.”{26} He says this is contrary to Paul’s message of salvation through grace not works.

What a mistaken understanding. In Matthew, Jesus explains that to enter God’s kingdom “our righteousness must surpass that of (the most religious Jews){27}.” We must not get angry, call people names, or lust even once. In fact, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”{28} Jesus clearly taught we cannot be good enough. Only through His sacrifice can we be made righteous.

In Acts 15, some believers with Pharisaical backgrounds brought the Mosaic Law up to the apostles. Peter told them, "Why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? . . . we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as (the Gentiles) also are." [{29}](#) The apostles and the whole church agreed to send the Gentiles word that they were not required to follow the Law.

Eichenwald is right: we are not required to follow the Law. The New Testament is very careful to identify actions and attitudes which are sin so may try to avoid them. This truth is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament. [{30}](#) Even in Acts 15, the apostles tell Gentile Christians to abstain from fornication [{31}](#), a term covering all sexual activity outside of marriage.

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the biblical teaching about government. He says Romans has "eight verses condemning those who criticize the government." [{32}](#) Pat Robertson sinned by stating, "We need . . . to pray to be delivered from this president."

Actually, Romans says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God." [{33}](#) We are not required to say good things about the government, but rather to obey the law. Our Bill of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech." [{34}](#) So, if we do not voice our opinions about our government, we are not availing ourselves of the law established by our governing authorities.

## Faulty Interpretation Part 3

As we examine popular arguments against the Bible, we will

conclude by looking at prayer. In his *Newsweek* article, Kurt Eichenwald castigates a Houston prayer rally{35} saying, “(Rick) Perry . . . boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America.” He claimed Perry “heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.”

In reality, Perry prayed succinctly for about two minutes with no empty phrases.

Eichenwald explains, Perry is just an example of our error. Most Christians are disobeying by praying in front of people. Jesus told us, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others.”

But someone can speak a prayer before others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our God. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue attenders, in front of His disciples,{36} and before over 5,000 people.{37} Those times, although numerous, were less than the time He spent praying alone as should be true for us.

Eichenwald states we should repeat the Lord’s prayer verbatim.

But in Matthew, Jesus gave an example of how to pray, not a set of words to repeat meaninglessly. The New Testament contains many prayers offered by the apostles and none repeat the words from the Lord’s prayer. If Eichenwald were there to instruct them, the apostles would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could pray in front of a large crowd, or on television, is “to be seen.” This claim does not make sense; the people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.

In this article we have seen that critics use an incomplete,

shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case, we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace concludes, "But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for . . . genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald's . . . grasp of genuine biblical scholarship (is), at best, subpar." [\[38\]](#)

If Eichenwald's article represents the best arguments discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation. However, realizing many readers of such pieces don't know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

## Notes

1. Eichenwald, Kurt, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin," *Newsweek Magazine*, December 2014.
2. There are numerous web postings placed after release of Eichenwald's article. Two you may find interesting that deal with areas of the article not addressed herein are as follows: Daniel B. Wallace, ["Predictable Christmas fare: Newsweek's Tirade against the Bible,"](#) blogpost December 2014; and Darrell Bock, ["Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald's Newsweek Article on the Bible,"](#) blogpost December 2014.
3. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010, pages 17-23.
4. Eichenwald, paragraph 4.
5. The 12 questions are as follows:
  1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
  2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
  3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?

Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?

4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . ., no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
  5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
  6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?
  7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
  8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
  9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
  10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
  11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
  12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?
6. Check your footnotes and the italics applied to the story of the woman caught in adultery and the last few verses of the Gospel of Mark.
7. Insert summary on 1 John 5:7, Luke 22:20, and Luke 24:51.
8. Wallace.
9. Ibid, paragraph .
10. New English Translation, Genesis 59 Chapter 2, Notes 9 and 11.
11. Ibid, paragraph 66.
12. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
13. See Luke 23:4,14,22.
14. See Acts 2:23,23,3:14-15,4:10,5:30.
15. Matthew 26:4,27:23-24.
16. Mark 14:1, 15:14-15.
17. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.

18. Ibid, paragraph 68.
19. William Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Zondervan, 2006.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.
21. Among those disagreeing with Eichenwald's assertion are Daniel Wallace, John MacArthur, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, and Craig Keener.
22. In Daniel Wallace, *Intro to 1st Timothy*, Dr. Wallace writes, "In sum, although the evidence against the authenticity of the pastorals is as strong as any evidence against the authenticity of any NT book, it still cannot overthrow the traditional view. The traditional view, however, must be modified by the substantial linguistic evidence against authenticity: an amanuensis (possibly Luke) had great freedom in writing these letters for the apostle Paul."
23. See the Watermark Community Church story: [www.watermark.org/statement](http://www.watermark.org/statement).
24. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
26. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
27. Matthew 5:20.
28. Matthew 5:48.
29. Acts 15:10-11.
30. For example in Mt 5:xx, Luke x:xx, John x:xx, Romans x:xx, Ephesians x:xx, Phil x:xx, 1 Peter x:xx, 1 John x:xx.
31. Acts 15:20,29.
32. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
33. Romans 13:1,2.
34. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.
35. Houston 2011.
36. John chapter 17.
37. Luke chapter 9.
38. Wallace, paragraph ??.

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# How Do We Respond to Calls to Discuss Justice in the Church?

*How do we respond to calls to discuss justice in the church? Not only is this a hot issue right now, but it is a critical issue to discuss. Because it is crucial, we need to address it in the church.*

## Approaching the Conversation

Primarily, we need to be intentional about how we approach the conversation (and yes it should be a conversation, not just one person teaching or giving a monologue). First, we need to be extra intrigued as to why others think differently than we do. We need to let them talk and accept their reactions as genuine. We need to stay away from rejecting what is being told by attributing a bad intention.

Second, we need to take note of whether we are processing the information as facts, filters, or identity<sup>{1}</sup> on our part individually, but as well look to know where others are coming from and why. Our goal should always be understanding, not only of issues but also of other people's perspectives.

Third, we need to be interested and ask questions, *not to beat the other person but to seek reciprocal knowledge* regarding why we differ or where the disagreements and pressure points are.

Fourth, we need to learn reflective listening, to correctly rephrase what we hear others to be saying in the tricky moments in a manner that reassures the other person: "This is



what I hear you saying. Did I get it right? Do I understand you correctly?" The importance at this point is that the other person gets to decide whether he/she is being understood. By engaging in these approaches, what is hopefully conveyed to others is that the fundamental purpose of our discussion is to dialogue—to understand each other, not only find out who is correct.{2}

## Defining Terms

As with almost any discussion today, I think it is necessary to define terms. This discussion especially calls for defining the term "justice" before we can even begin. For instance, when having this discussion are we saying merely "justice", or the now popular term "social justice", or a seemingly Christian claim to "biblical justice?" This alone takes up a good chunk of the discussion. Read how one popular journalist describes this dilemma: "I put on my prospector's helmet and mined the literature for an agreed-upon definition of social justice. . . . What I found," he bemoans, "was one deposit after another of fool's gold. From labor unions to countless universities to gay rights groups to even the American Nazi Party, everyone insisted they were champions of social justice."{3}

The word *justice* in Scripture means to prescribe the right way, {4} and the two key metaphors used in Scripture are level scales and an even path (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; Isaiah 1:16-17; Amos 5:21-25; Matthew 23:23). Now any variation of justice could refer to Christian attempts to eradicate human trafficking, help the inner-city needy, creating hospitals and orphanages, overturn racism, and safeguard the unborn. I propose we call this *biblical justice* and use a definition provided by pastor, speaker, and author Dr. Tony Evans: "The equitable and impartial application of the rule of God's moral law in society."{5} He arrives at this definition because God's ways are just (Deuteronomy 32:4) and He is the supreme

lawgiver (James 4:12), therefore His laws and judgments are just and righteous (Psalm 19:7-9; 111:7-8). Furthermore, they are to be applied with no partiality (Deuteronomy 1:17; Leviticus 19:15; Numbers 15:16).

What is social justice then? Recently, *social justice* has brought on an exceptionally charged political meaning. It turned into a brandishing poster for groups like Antifa, which finds physical aggression against persons who believe differently as both morally justified and tactically successful, and praises its underreported verbal beatings. Social justice is the brandishing poster for universities across the country where the “oppressor vs. oppressed” narrative of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Note: *Oppression* is a biblical term. The prophets precede these authors by millennia! The term or its presence in the world is not automatically in this area.), the deconstructionism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the gender and queer theory of Judith Butler have been inserted into the very definition of the term.[\[6\]](#)

As Evans summarizes,

*Social justice* has become a convoluted term meaning different things to different people. It is often used as a catchphrase for illegitimate forms of government that promote the redistribution of wealth as the collectivistic illegitimate expansion of civil government, which wrongly infringes on the jurisdictions of God’s other covenantal institutions (family and church).[\[7\]](#)

However biblical the roots of the term *social justice* are, it has been hijacked (still as some might criticize what is going on for other reasons). There is a concern labels can oversimplify matters and make binary classifications. Pitting “biblical justice” against “social justice” brands is making binary means of seeing ideas and dangers, creating a false dichotomy. Certainly, there are things that the “social

justice" group is doing that is other than the biblical response to advocating justice. However, several of the concerns that they are raising are reasonable. One of the troubles is that they are recommending political solutions to problems that are beyond complicated and in the end need God's divine change of individual hearts. But labels can also clarify distinctions between various models. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I propose when we are discussing *justice*, we aim for the meaning of *biblical justice*. After clarifying and defining terms, we would want to check and make sure all interested parties are on the same page.

## CRT

Now I we need to address Critical Race Theory (CRT) because I believe these ideas are a problem that infiltrate Christian thinking and the church. Legal scholar and law professor Richard Delgado defines CRT:

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. [\[8\]](#)

I think we can all agree racism is bad, and because CRT has been pushed to the forefront and claims to deal with the issue of racism, it has been extremely easy for Christians to adopt a terrible framework with good intentions. This needs to be corrected. Otherwise, it remains an elephant in the room

especially for Neo-Fundamentalist Evangelicals and Mainstream Evangelicals (as defined by Michael Graham [here](#)).

As pastor and theologian Dr. Voddie Baucham points out, the movement has several qualities of a cult, including keeping near enough to the Bible to prevent instant exposure and concealing the truth that it has a different theology and a novel lexicon that deviates from Christian orthodoxy. In traditional cult style, they steal from the common and acknowledged, then immerse it with different connotation. [\[9\]](#) The worst part about this theory is there is no final solution to the problem. CRT just offers an endless cycle of division and racism at worst. At best, it draws attention to the sin of racism.

There is much more that can be said on this, and I would suggest anyone who wants to explore this more read the books listed in my bibliography below. Most of them cover CRT in some fashion.

## **Does Focusing on Biblical Justice Get Us Off Mission?**

I want to address the concern of whether focusing on biblical justice gets the church off mission. I think the mission of the church is to equip the saints and make disciples. That is a broad vision. The question is still whether focusing on biblical justice is part of that mission. If it is not already clear in the definition of the term above (even the name *biblical* justice supplies a hint to this answer), I would like to clearly and explicitly answer whether this is part of the mission of the church.

The responsibility of the church is to perform biblical justice for the poor, orphans, widows, foreigners, enemies, oppressed, hungry, homeless, and needy. Scripture concerns biblical justice particularly to these parties as a main matter; for it is these parties that best denote the powerless

in the world and take the burden of injustices. The church is not to harm or ostracize the poor (James 2:15-16), or to have status and racial prejudice (Galatians 2:11-14). Instead, the church is appointed to take on the basic needs of the disadvantaged. I would also point out (particularly for the Evangelical Christians) this does not mean promoting reckless handouts, which the Bible rigorously forbids (2 Thessalonians 3:10; Proverbs 6:9-11; 10:4; 13:18; 30-34).

Furthermore, Probe Ministries President Kerby Anderson made a marvelous point (to me over email) regarding Christians in the workforce: "ALL Christians are to be salt and light. But believers who are CALLED to positions related to justice (judges, lawyers, law enforcement, political leaders) are to use their gifts to promote justice. Not only is that not OFF MISSION, but it is exactly their mission in their job."

Ultimately, *doing justice* satisfies the two highest commandments granted to us by Jesus: to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). "Biblical justice is a foundational part of fulfilling the purpose of the church as intimated by the heart of God. It is a result of God's people becoming one through being what God has called us to be and participating in what He has called us to do—*justice*." [\[10\]](#)

## Asians and Other Minorities

Usually, at least in our environment, the discussion about racial friction is likely a black/white discussion, although lately it has come to be obvious that this is not only a black-and-white discussion. Often, people of Asian background are not being addressed in any way. Now the COVID pandemic ignited some racial prejudice and hatred against Chinese individuals and other Asian individuals. What we are getting more in the news and social media is that for Asians, issues have shifted, and matters appear to be extremely different for them. So, you look at these events and, I believe for certain individuals, they are living with more concern since, whether

they have faced that sort of prejudice, they are watching it being discussed in the news and on social media. So, for those that are reading this and even considering this for the first time, I want to point out what is truly a shortage of emotional quotient in the sense we relate with each other. Jesus speaks, “treat people the same way you want them to treat you.” {11} One of the shifts of philosophy demands that we manage to stop seeing people through a lens of stereotypes that we have, and see the one we are relating with individually. I believe it is extremely useful to think about our longing to develop the proper sort of community in our church. The further we take part and understand the various types of life encounters and experiences that individuals have, the richer we will be as we communicate with individuals.

## Recommendations for the Church

As Tony Evans says, “Theology must never be limited to esoteric biblical conclusions void of practical strategies for bringing God’s truth to life through our obedience and good works.” {12} The church needs to take the lead in creating unity through clearly showing it in our lives. What I would recommend the church does is follow this three-point plan: {13}

### **1. Assemble: Unified Hallowed Meeting**

Build a community-wide pastors’ group that meets consistently and holds a yearly sacred gathering (Isaiah 58:1-12; Ephesians 2:11-22).

a. Begin or enter a racially and denominationally varied community of kingdom-inclined pastors in our community region. A national group has already been formed at [letstalklive.org/](http://letstalklive.org/).

b. Come together consistently with kingdom-inclined pastors

to improve relations, offer reciprocal support and to meet the demands of one another.

## **2. Address: Unified Caring Tone**

Aggressively cultivate disciples who speak out with unified messaging, presenting biblical truths and answers on current social problems (John 17:13-23; Matthew 28:16-20).

a. Pursue common ground and common goals that encourage biblical answers to current problems needing to be tackled, instead of becoming caught on the areas of conflict. Demonstrate grace.

b. Hold conversation groups and prayer meetings to discover biblical responses to social problems.

## **3. Act: Unified Community Affect**

Jointly organize our church to achieve a noticeable spirit of continuing good works enhancing the good of underserved neighborhoods (Jeremiah 29:5-7; Matthew 5:13-16).

a. Create a group for business leaders who would like to help in establishing work prospects and economic growth for underserved areas.

When we work together to *Assemble*, *Address*, and *Act* for God's kingdom in the public, we will create a larger effect as one. The extent of our unity will affect the extent of our influence.

## **Notes**

1. Darrell L. Bock, *Cultural Intelligence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 54-58.

2. These approaches and intentions are adapted from Bock, *Cultural Intelligence*, 59-60.

3. Jonah Goldberg, "The Problem with 'Social Justice,'" *Indy Star*, February 6, 2019,



[www.indystar.com/story/opinion/2019/02/10/jonah-goldberg-the-problem-social-justice/2814705002/](http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/2019/02/10/jonah-goldberg-the-problem-social-justice/2814705002/).

4. Tony Evans, *Oneness Embraced* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 328.
5. Evans, 329.
6. Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 4-5.
7. Evans, 328.
8. Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, Third Edition. NYU Press. Kindle Edition, p. 3.
9. Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 67.
10. Evans, 335.
11. New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Matthew 7:12.
12. Tony Evans, *Kingdom Race Theology* (Chicago: IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 89.
13. Adapted from *Kingdom Race Theology*, 100.

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# What a Biblical Worldview Looks Like

*Sue Bohlin explores elements of a way of looking at life that provides a biblical world and life view.*

## What Is a Worldview?

A young Christian couple I know married with high hopes for the future. Within three years they were divorced; the husband handled his hatred for his job by snapping at his wife and retreating to online gaming, and the wife shut down her heart to him and opened it to someone else.

In her book [\*Total Truth\*](#), Nancy Pearcey tells of a Christian lawyer whose job was to find loopholes in the contracts with clients his law firm wanted to get rid of—that is, which enabled his company to break promises.<sup>{1}</sup> She tells another story of a Christian who worked at an abortion facility and never saw any conflict between the Bible she studied and its command not to murder.<sup>{2}</sup>



This disconnect between biblical teaching and the way it's

lived out is not just an American problem. Many African Christians go to church on Sundays and pray to Jesus for healing or prosperity, but when He doesn't answer the way they wanted, they go to the village witch doctor.

All these people profess to be Christ-followers and agree that the Bible is the Word of God, yet they don't view reality or live out their lives as if Jesus were Lord and the Bible is true. They don't have a biblical worldview. They don't "think Christianly."

Nancy Pearcey writes, "'Thinking Christianly' means understanding that Christianity gives the truth about the whole of reality, a perspective for interpreting every subject matter."[\[3\]](#) It means we learn to interpret everything in light of its relationship to God. The title of Nancy's book, *Total Truth*, reflects her premise: that Christianity is not just a collection of religious truths, it is *total* truth. Thinking Christianly—which equips us to then live out a biblical worldview—means we understand that natural and supernatural are seamlessly woven into one reality.

Our worldview is like an invisible pair of glasses through which we see reality and life. If we have the wrong prescription, the wrong beliefs and assumptions, what we see will be fuzzy and undependable. If we have the right prescription, we will see things as they are. The prescription of these glasses consists of our beliefs and the things we assume to be true. These beliefs and assumptions comprise the filter through which we experience and interpret life. And we *all* have a filter.

For example, let's say you walk into a Walmart and discover you are their zillionth customer. Balloons drop, strobe lights go off, and you are handed a \$1000 gift card, a trip to Disneyworld, and the keys to a new car. Your worldview will determine how you interpret that event. If you believe in fate, you will think, "It's my lucky day! The stars are

shining on me!" If you believe in only this physical, material universe, you will think, "Nice, but it's a totally random and meaningless occurrence." If you believe that Jesus is Lord over everything, you will think, "I so do not deserve this gift of grace, but I thank You for it, Lord. How do You want me to be a good steward of this amazing blessing?"

Everyone has a worldview, even though most people aren't aware of it. We believe a biblical worldview is the right prescription for both living and understanding life.

## **Creation, Fall, and Redemption**

My friend Dr. Jeff Myers of Summit Ministries says, "[A] person's worldview is his default answers to life's most pressing questions: Where did I come from? How should I live? What happens when I die?, and How do I know my answers to these questions are true?"[\[4\]](#)

We all buy into an overarching story that explains much of why things are the way they are. For example, people who believe in traditional folk religion (animism) believe there are spirits connected to every physical item and event and place, and this way of looking at life shapes their response to the things that happen in life. People who embrace pantheism—a view of life that sees everything connected as part of a divine but impersonal force with no personal God and no distinctions between good and evil—will respond differently.

If we draw our worldview from the story of God's dealing with mankind from the Bible, a helpful way to structure it is terms of creation, fall, and redemption. They answer the big three universal questions: Where did we come from? Why are things so messed up? How can it be fixed? Everything that exists and everything that happens falls into one of these categories.

*Creation* answers the question, where did we come from? as well as a basic philosophical question, why is there something

rather than nothing at all? God created us in His image for the purpose of having a relationship with us, and He created the universe and our world as well. This explains the exquisite design we see in the human body, right down to the molecular machines inside cells. Creation explains why the earth is so finely tuned for life—just the right distance from just the right kind of star and the right kind of moon, just the right temperature for liquid water, just the right kind of atmosphere for us to breathe.

The relational God, whose very being consists of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, created us in His image to draw us into the circle of divine mutual love and fellowship and delight. The reason we are here is so God could lavish love on us by sharing Himself with us and inviting us to participate in the divine life. That explains why we are so relational, and why we need and enjoy other people. It explains why we are hard-wired to be spiritual—because He made us for Himself, and He is spirit. He created the universe and our planet as an expression of His love and glory, and because physical people need a physical place to live. A beautiful God creating us in His image explains why we love beauty in the world, in art, in music, and in every other expression of human culture.

The *Fall* answers the question, what went wrong? Adam and Eve's rebellion against God brought sin into His marvelous creation, resulting in brokenness, blindness, and nothing working the way it did in the perfect, pre-fall world. The fall explains why death feels so unnatural, why there is suffering and sickness. It explains why there is moral evil like murder, rape and theft, and why there is natural evil like earthquakes and tsunamis and tornadoes. Many people are angry at God at these things. But they are all effects of the fall. He didn't create the world this way; we're the ones who messed it up. This fallen world breaks His heart far more than it breaks ours.

The good news is *Redemption*. God is working to set things

right and restore His damaged, distorted creation. This explains why our souls long for justice, for the wicked to face the consequences of their evil choices, and for things to be fair and right. A just God will fulfill our longing for justice. He will make the wrongs right and the shattered whole. Good will triumph over evil once and for all. God's promise of restoration explains why we still long for the perfection of Eden, even while we live immersed in a world and relationships that are far from perfect: He's going to bring it back. The Lord Jesus Christ, who came to earth as fully God and fully man, living as one of us and then dying in our place, rising again, and ascending back to the Father's right hand, promises He is making all things new (Rev. 21:5). God's got a plan and He's working it!

## **Living in Two Worlds**

One of my favorite things to do is go snorkeling in the crystal clear waters of the Caribbean. When I'm wearing a mask and a snorkel tube, I can float on the water's surface and enjoy the beautiful fish and corals that live in the underwater world. But I can also breathe air from the above-water world. When I'm snorkeling, I get to enjoy two worlds, two spheres of life, at the same time.

This is a picture of what it looks like to live out a biblical worldview. Paul exhorts us to focus "not [on] the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). We live in a physical world, but looking at life biblically also means living in awareness of the unseen, eternal spiritual reality that also surrounds us. Many believers make the mistake of living as if they were functional naturalists—as if the material, physical world were all there is.

Thinking biblically means staying aware and focused on the

spiritual and eternal part of life, letting that guide our interpretation of physical and temporal events. That doesn't mean dismissing or denying the physical, living like some sort of ascetic who refuses to engage with the world; we just keep it in perspective.

I believe this is what the Lord Jesus intended when He said to "seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33). The physical world is so in-your-face about its reality—especially when we get tired, hungry, thirsty every day—that we don't have any trouble being aware of *this* sphere of life. But focusing on (or even just staying aware of) the unseen, eternal part of life, like donning snorkel gear and going face-down in the water, allows us to function in both worlds at the same time. Next time you're in a group where people share prayer requests, pay attention to how many of them are in the physical realm: health, finances, jobs, etc. These things are important, but according to Jesus' priorities, the Kingdom—the unseen realm where He is Lord—is *more* important. I wonder what would happen if our prayer requests started reflecting this priority?

The seventeenth century monk Brother Lawrence lived out an important spiritual discipline he called "practicing the presence of God." When we do this, we are able to process the heartbreak of living in a fallen world and the apparent unfairness of what looks like evil winning. When we read what the prophet Habbakuk wrote, and what Asaph recorded in Psalm 73, we see what it looks like to remember that God is sovereign, and He is able to make all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). It helps us see all people as beloved image bearers for whom Christ died, even the jerks who cut us off in traffic. It helps us remember that what may feel like a bizarre random event may actually be the attack of spiritual warfare. It helps us balance our now-fallen feelings, which were impacted by the Fall like everything else, with the truth

of God's word. For example, one Christian woman filed for divorce from her husband with no biblical grounds, claiming that it must be okay since she didn't *feel* "convicted by God."

Thinking biblically means cultivating an awareness of the spiritual realm: the eternally important things, and the activity of God, angels, and demons. It's like going through life wearing snorkel gear!

## Refusing the Sacred/Secular Split

Have you ever heard someone saying something like, "Well, I personally oppose abortion, but I would never say that it's wrong for anyone else because that's a private issue." Or, do you give ten percent of what you think of as *your* money to the Lord because that's His portion? Do you think of your spiritual life as time spent reading the Bible and going to church, but the rest of the week is yours? One of the ways Christians fail to live out a biblical worldview is when we buy into the false division of the sacred and the secular.

Thinking biblically means not only believing that Jesus is Lord at the moment of our deaths, but He is also Lord over every aspect of our lives and every aspect of His creation. He created this world, He owns it, He entered it, and He redeemed it. He created us in His image, and then commanded us to take the salt and light of our image-bearing influence into every aspect of life: business, science, law, education, politics, and art, to name a few. The "Creation Mandate" is found in Genesis 1:2:

God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and *subdue it*; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (emphasis mine).

Let's look at some examples:



- I've had a freelance [calligraphy business](#) for thirty years. Beyond showing honesty and integrity in my business dealings, there is also value in the beauty I bring into people's lives through my hand lettering as a reflection of God's beauty.
- All of my husband [Ray's](#) education is in biology. He lives out his biblical worldview by seeking to explore and understand God's creation through science, then explaining it to others in a way that gives glory to God.
- Christian educators who express a biblical worldview are teaching about God's world and God's truths whether they mention Him or not. Whether it's the glorious patterns of mathematics or the themes of great literature, the Lordship of Christ ties it all together.
- My son's undergraduate education was in art, and we loved seeing how he wove his biblical worldview into his art pieces. He suggests that a Christian artist has the opportunity to express both the brokenness of life in a fallen world as well as the hope and redemption found in Christ.
- Christians in law can live out their biblical worldview by using their knowledge of the law to create protection for the weak and defenseless, to criminalize criminal behavior, and to codify making restitution, all of which are biblical values.

One element of living out a biblical worldview is refusing to compartmentalize life into our religious activities and then everything else, as if spiritual truth and concepts were unrelated to how we live our lives. One of my dear friends has lived in moral and emotional purity for three years after repenting of her lesbian relationship. The temptation can be strong some days, but she consistently chooses Jesus over her feelings. One day her supervisor, who goes to a large church,

asked if she were gay. My friend replied that she used to claim a gay identity, but she's been emotionally and sexually sober for three years. Her supervisor asked why, and my friend said, "Because it's sin! It's not God's design or intention."

"Oh, it's not sin!" her supervisor cheerfully assured her. "God wants you to be happy! You just need to find the right girl and settle down." My friend is living out a biblical worldview; her Christian supervisor, who most definitely does not, relegates the Bible to religious topics that don't intersect with where the rest of life is lived. (Not only that: the Enemy used the supervisor's lies and wrong beliefs to harass my friend as part of an all-out spiritual warfare attack.)

Jesus is Lord, and He loves and provides for His creation through people, whether we are delivering milk or delivering babies, serving in the military or the government, growing corn or managing hedge funds, raising our family or even serving in ministry. It's *all* God's work and we get to share in it (1 Cor. 3:9). Just as we can't divide colors into sacred and secular, we shouldn't do it with the rest of life either.

## **Processing Life Through a Biblical Worldview**

I said earlier that a worldview is like a pair of glasses that is comprised of our beliefs and assumptions through which we see and interpret life. My husband, Ray, and I got a chance to put our biblical worldview into practice a few years ago when someone ran a red light and slammed into his car. He sustained a concussion but, miraculously, no cuts or scratches or broken anything. It took almost a year for him to recover from both the impact on his body and the mental fuzziness of his concussion.

As we processed this accident and the difficulties that

unfolded from it, we experienced the wisdom that comes from interpreting life according to the truth of God's word. Other [worldviews](#) would have interpreted this experience differently:

- *Naturalism*, the belief that the physical world is all there is, and there is no spiritual or supernatural component to life, would say, "Ray was in a car wreck, but there's no meaning to it. It was just another accident; *everything* is an accident without purpose. Whether he survived or had been killed, ultimately that wouldn't make any difference anyway since all of life is a random, meaningless existence."
- *Pantheism*, the belief that all of life is a spiritual reality and the physical world is an illusion, would say, "Ray, his car, the other driver, and her car, are all part of 'the one,' the unifying essence of the universe. All of these particulars are an illusion, since there is only one reality where everything and everyone is divine." And since many pantheists also share many of Eastern mysticism's beliefs, we would hear, "Ray must have done something terrible in a previous life to have experienced this trauma in this life. He was working off his bad karma from an earlier existence."
- [Traditional folk religion \(Animism\)](#), the belief that the spirit world is constantly manipulating life in the physical world, because there is a spirit or spiritual force behind every event, might say, "Ray must have made some spirit angry with him. He needs to say some magic words or burn some incense or build an altar or do something to get the angry spirit to not be angry with him anymore."

Since we seek to make the truth of God's word the pair of glasses through which we view life, our filter includes the question, what does God say about this? Together, we practiced responding to this trauma according to our Christian

worldview.

The most important truth was that God exists, and He has revealed Himself to be all-powerful and all-knowing. That means that getting “t-boned” was not a random accident that just happened. We reminded ourselves that He was still sovereign; a loving God was in control, even though He allowed Ray to get hit and his car totaled by a driver without insurance. God is all-powerful and could have prevented the accident, but for some reason He didn’t. We determined to trust Him even though He wasn’t explaining Himself.

This was a very bad car wreck, and the witnesses couldn’t believe he wasn’t killed instantly. Instead, he was protected from serious injury. We have thanked God many times for His amazing protection that resulted in 100% recovery.

Ray experienced very real pain and suffering, but we know from the Bible where that comes from: the fall of man is responsible for most pain and all suffering. He was not troubled by the possibility that his suffering might be meaningless because there was no one “up there” or “out there” giving meaning to it, like the view of life that atheists and agnostics have to face.

Ray’s car wreck had a special impact on me. At the time, I was dealing with my fear for my son’s safety since he was about to enter the Air Force during a war. Because Ray’s car wreck happened just three blocks from home, God impressed on me that His protection has nothing to do with geography. The best place to be, the safest place to be, is in God’s hand, and He has promised that no one can snatch us from His hand (John 8:28-29). I sensed Him impressing me that I could trust Him with my son the same way He protected my husband from lasting damage.

I hope this article helps you grow in your ability to think biblically so you can see life as it really is—one reality

comprised of both the physical and spiritual, God's world, God's life—that He invites you into.

## Notes

1. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 31.
2. Ibid., 97-98.
3. Ibid., 34.
4. Email from Dr. Jeff Myers, April 19, 2011.

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# Worldviews Through History – Compared to a Christian View

*Kerby Anderson provides a summary of how mankind has viewed the world from the Romans until today. This summary provides us a perspective against which to compare and contrast a Christian, biblical worldview based on New Testament principles.*

## Roman Worldview

On the Probe Web site we often talk about [worldviews](#). I want to explain how the worldviews we talk about developed through history. We will be using as our foundation an excellent book written by Professor Glenn Sunshine whom I have met and also had the privilege of interviewing. His book is *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home*. [\[1\]](#)

Glenn Sunshine is a member of the church that Jonathan Edwards attended when he was at Yale. Professor Sunshine gave a lecture about Jonathan Edwards's worldview at a conference they held, and Chuck Colson invited him to teach with the Centurions program. He gave a talk about "How We Got Here" and then later turned it into *Why You Think the Way You Do*.



Since we will be talking about worldview, it would be good to begin with Glenn Sunshine's definition. "A worldview is the framework you use to interpret the world and your place in it."[{2}](#) You do not need to be a philosopher to have a worldview. All of us have a worldview.

Although Glenn Sunshine begins with the worldview of the Roman world, he quickly takes us back to neo-Platonism. It was the religion and philosophy based upon Plato's ideas. Neo-Platonism was the belief that the fundamental ground of reality is non-physical. Instead it is found in the world of ideas (and is known as *idealism*). These ideas cast shadows that cast other shadows until they arrive at the physical world.

According to this worldview, the whole universe exists as a hierarchy. The spiritual is superior to the physical. This provides a scale of values for the world, but also provides a scale for humanity. In other words, those who are superior should rule over those who are inferior because they have demonstrated their ability to rule or conquer.

This view of hierarchy led to the idea of the father having superiority over all members of the family. It led to the idea that men are superior to women. It led to the idea that the emperor should rule and be worshipped. And it led to the idea that slaves are inferior to free people and nothing more than "living tools."[{3}](#)

This explains not only the success of Rome but also its ugly

underside. Essentially there are two pictures of Rome: “the glittering empire and the rotten core.”[{4}](#)

In Rome, human life did not have much value. While it is true that Romans abandoned human sacrifice, they engaged in other practices equally abhorrent. “They picked up the Etruscan practice of having people fight to the death in games in honor of the dead.”[{5}](#)

Slavery provided the economic foundation for the empire. Abortion and infanticide were regularly practiced. “Roman families would usually keep as many healthy sons as they had and only one daughter; the rest were simply discarded.”[{6}](#) And Roman law required that a father kill any visibly deformed child.

## **Transformation of the Pagan World**

How did Christianity transform the pagan world? In AD 303, the Roman emperor Diocletian began a severe persecution of Christians. But because Christians were faithful and even willing to go to their deaths for their beliefs, their credibility increased. Eventually they were accepted and allowed to exercise their faith. Constantine even legalized the Christian faith by AD 313.

Once that took place, Christian ideas were allowed to percolate through society. One of the most important ideas was that human beings are created in the image of God. This idea has a profound impact. First, it meant that people are fundamentally equal to each other. No longer were there grounds for saying that some people are superior to others. In fact, “Christians were the first people in history to oppose slavery systematically.”[{7}](#)

Christians (who believed that all are created in the image of God) treated the sick differently. They believed that even those who were deathly ill still deserved care. Dionysius of

Alexandria reported that Christians (often at great risk to their own lives) “visited the sick fearlessly and ministered to them continually.”[\[8\]](#) They would rescue babies abandoned in an act of infanticide. They would oppose abortion.

In economics, we can also see the influence of Christianity. The idea that God created the universe and then rested showed that God worked. That would mean that human beings (made in the image of God) are expected to work as well. God gave Adam and Eve intellectual work (in naming the animals) and physical work (in tending the Garden). Contrast this with the Roman world where physical work was seen as something that only slaves would do. Christians saw labor as something that was intrinsically valuable.

Labor is good; drudgery is bad. Drudgery is a result of the Fall (Genesis 3). So Christians were the first to develop technology to remove drudgery from work. Other civilizations had technology, but the West uniquely applied such things as water power to make work more valuable and worthwhile by eliminating the drudgery and repetitive nature of certain tasks.

Property rights were also well-developed during this period. “The medieval world under the influence of Christianity has a much stronger emphasis on property rights than other cultures had.”[\[9\]](#)

These ideas come from a biblical worldview and began to be developed during the Middle Ages. This led to a complete transformation of western society and set it on a trajectory to our modern world.

## **Christianity and Politics**

Glenn Sunshine points out that in the West, the dynamic between church and state is unique. Christianity was originally a persecuted minority religion. Even when



Christianity was declared a legal religion, the church did not depend upon the state. So the question of the relationship between church and state has been an open question.

During the Middle Ages, two men helped shape political thinking. The first was Augustine, who described two realms: the City of God and the City of Man. He argued that human government is the result of sin. He believed that it is based upon selfishness. Government itself is corruption. In the absence of government, anarchy reigns. So government is a necessary evil.

The City of God is different in that it is not based upon force or coercion. It is based upon love, charity, and repentance. That doesn't mean that the City of Man and the City of God cannot work together. But overall, Augustine had a more pessimistic view of government.

Aristotle had a different view of government. As people in the Middle Ages began to rediscover Aristotle, they began to develop a different view of government. They saw government as a necessary institution that God has placed in the world. It had positive and legitimate functions.

Aristotle believed that government had a more positive role in society. But the Christian theologians had to also deal with the problem of original sin. They wanted to find a way to prevent original sin from corrupting the government. The tension between these two views is what drives the discussion of western political theory.

Sunshine notes that "another check on civil government involved the idea of rights."[\[10\]](#) We normally associate the idea of rights, especially inalienable rights, with eighteenth century political theorists. However, John Locke's idea that we have inalienable right to life, liberty, and property is already found in the writings of medieval theologians. The basis for this is a belief that all are created in the image

of God. Therefore, all of us have a number of natural rights that the state cannot remove. Natural law was the idea that God wove moral laws into the fabric of the universe.

There also was the belief that there should be limitations on the jurisdiction of civil government and church government. One example is the Magna Carta, that stated that the English church was to be free and its liberties unimpaired by the crown.

## **The Renaissance and Enlightenment**

What about the transformation into the modern world? In the early modern period, starting with the Renaissance in the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century, there are a whole series of events that shook the worldview consensus that developed in the Middle Ages.

Previously there were certain beliefs about truth: (1) that truth was absolute, (2) that truth is knowable to the human mind, and (3) that truth is necessary for society (a society could not be based upon a lie). The best good guide for truth would be the great civilizations of the past that lasted for so long and thus must have been based upon truth.

The idea was to go to the past to find truth. During the Renaissance scholars were very successful in collecting manuscripts and finding ancient sources. Unfortunately, they found so many sources that they discovered there was not a coherent perspective. The ancient writers disagreed with each other. In a sense, the Renaissance was a victim of its own success. There was too much information. The more ancient sources they found, the less likely they would find agreement in the perspectives. Once it became obvious that this grand synthesis was not possible, the entire purpose of intellectual activity was thrown into question.

Then there were the wars of the Reformation in which various

factions fought over who was the true follower of the prince of peace. The devastation of the religious wars left many people wondering if there really was religious certainty. No longer was the question "is Christianity true" but rather "which Christianity is true?" Now you had a multiplicity of options that left people confused. This also generated questions about the role of religion in society.

Then you also had the discovery of the New World and whole people groups that had never heard the gospel. Some began to ask questions like: Is it fair of God to send them all to hell because they had never heard of Christianity? Or, in light of biblical history, where did they come from? How do these people fit with the story of Noah? These discoveries called into question biblical morality and biblical history.

Also, people started using a new way of looking at knowledge. They began to use the scientific method to evaluate everything. This begins a significant shift in how we understand the world. There is a movement away from certainty toward probability. There is also a movement away from studying ancient authors toward scientific experimentation.

In the modern world, therefore, truth is not found in the past but in the present and future. With this is also questioning of biblical authority.

## **The Modern World and Christianity**

Let me conclude by talking about our modern world and how Christians should respond. Sunshine concludes his book with chapters on "Modernity and Its Discontents" and "The Decay of Modernity." Essentially the modern world has left humans with a loss of truth, certainty, and meaning in life. "Materialism provides a ready answer to the question of the meaning and purpose of life: there is none."[{11}](#) From a Darwinian perspective, our only purpose is to pass our genes on to the

next generation.

This rejection of spirituality and meaning has ushered in various other worldviews as alternatives. These would be such worldviews as postmodernism, neo-paganism, and the New Age Movement. Sunshine argues that in many ways we have been catapulted back to Rome.

Like Rome we value toleration as the supreme virtue. Rome believed that toleration was important because it kept the empire together. If you go beyond the lines of toleration, you are persecuted. This is similar to the mindset today. The highest value in a postmodern world is toleration. Toleration so defined means that we will embrace any and all lifestyles people may choose.

The Romans lived in an oversexed society.[\[12\]](#) So do we. Rome practiced abortion. So does our society. Rome was antinatal and made a deliberate attempt to prevent pregnancy. They focused on sexual enjoyment and did not want to bother with kids. In our modern world, birthrates in most of the western democracies are plummeting.

Western civilization is a product of ancient Roman civilization plus Christianity. Sunshine argues that once you removed Christianity, modern society reverted back to Roman society and a recovery of the ancient pagan worldview.

So how should Christians live in this world? Of course, we should live out a biblical worldview. Every generation is called to live faithfully to the gospel, and our generation is no exception.

This is especially important today since we are facing a society that is not willing to accept biblical ideas. In many ways, we face a challenge similar to the early church, though not as daunting. From history we can see that the early church did live faithfully and transformed the Roman world. Christians produced a totally new civilization: western

culture. By living faithfully before the watching world, we will increase our credibility and earn the respect from those who are around us by living in accordance with biblical principles.

## Notes

1. Glenn Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
2. Ibid., 13.
3. Ibid., 31
4. Ibid., 20
5. Ibid., 30
6. Ibid., 33-34
7. Ibid., 43
8. Ibid., 44
9. Ibid., 76
10. Ibid., 91
11. Ibid., 177
12. Ibid., 33

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## The Allure of Home

*T.S. Weaver investigates ways by which one can employ cultural methods to make the gospel appealing. He concentrates on one piece of culture and expresses a few ideas on how it can be used in the defense of the faith.*

Is the pandemic over yet? If we can count the fact that the [U.S. has lifted COVID-19 test requirement for international travel as an indicator](#), I think it's safe to say it is.

Regardless, I think we have had enough time to reflect on its impact. The pandemic was an extraordinary blow in 2020. I can remember how it all unfolded like it was yesterday. Everything shut down and my fiancé at the time started working from home (at my apartment mostly because she did not have internet at hers) and I followed suit about a week later, and the infamous toilet paper hoarding began around the nation. Around two years later, the pandemic acts as the backdrop to daily living, and my now-wife is still working from home.

We are rethinking the way we do a lot of things. As one commentator said, “A global health crisis has exposed outdated economic, political and social systems. For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, we have the facility to reimagine our world.”<sup>{1}</sup> While I am not sure what all he means by that, and how much of it is an exaggeration, I can agree the crisis changed things. This same commentator, Kian Bakhtiari, has predicted seven cultural trends “that will shape the next decade.”<sup>{2}</sup> I would call them “cultural texts.” According to Kevin Vanhoozer, each cultural text “has meaning to the extent that it communicates something about our values, our concerns, and our self-understanding.”<sup>{3}</sup> Bakhtiari lists his observed cultural texts as:

- a return to traditions
- metaverse jurisdiction
- creator inequality
- divisions in diversity
- ethical investment
- employee activism
- consumerism in crisis

Bakhtiari says,

Uncertainty has created a strong nostalgia for the good old days and a newfound desire to be rooted in tradition. We, humans, tell ourselves stories to make sense of the world. Stories make us feel like we have control. They allow people

to find meaning where there is chaos. In moments of crisis, we often choose to escape the present by seeking refuge in the past.{4}

Has he been reading Joshua Chatraw (author of *Telling a Better Story*) or Paul Gould (author of *Cultural Apologetics*)? Chatraw explains the problem with the current cultural narratives that makes even more sense of Bakhtiari:

Something's missing. There is a shallowness that gnaws away at the fleeting happiness these narratives offer. The realities of life have a way of applying such pressure at times even the cynic can't help but peer into the secular crevasses beneath his feet. People can't help but feel the existential angst when the script they've assumed begins to break down.{5}

Like Ursula Le Guin says, "There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."{6} Chatraw again says, "Despite the cries of those who claim that we as modern enlightened people should come of age and simply logic-chop our way to truth, story still remains our *lingua franca*."{7}

Bakhtiari takes this story/narrative idea in the direction of connecting with the past via tradition. The first example he gives is something I was completely unaware of and do not understand, but I am not surprised. His example is Gen-Z's fascination with Y2K fashion, 90s sitcoms and even wired headphones. First, let us all just acknowledge Gen-Zs are weird. During my internship at Probe Ministries, one of the things I learned is that Gen-Zs drive mentors nuts because they are so hard to understand and connect with. Second, I did not even know there was such a thing as Y2K fashion. Strangely, even though I do not understand the appeal with these things other than just they are "old," I have noticed a similar fascination with Mason jars.

All this said, I still do not understand what Bakhtiari means by tradition in this context. He somewhat clarifies by pointing out how globalization attributes to the feeling of losing “local traditions and identity.” His proposed solution for global brands is that

They need to find ways to remain culturally relevant in different markets—with divergent needs and values—while maintaining global consistency. This can only be achieved by working with local markets to produce consumer segments, including different communities and sub-cultures.{8}

Admittedly, I wish he would have gotten more specific, but I often find that when people talk about culture, it is usually in broad strokes and abstract thoughts. I have deciphered what I think he meant by tradition, how it affects culture, and how it is charmed.

## Disillusionment

But how did we get to the point that traditions or old stuff have become so attractive to people? For C.S. Lewis there is a “narrative embedded within the deeper structures of the created order, which enables, shapes and moulds the construction and narration of human stories.”{9} I believe there is also a narrative embedded within cultural structures. Again, Bakhtiari believes globalization is the problem. So what story is globalization telling us? Bakhtiari thinks the story goes something like,

Many countries and communities feel like they have lost their local traditions and identity. The move towards localization is further compounded by nations prioritizing self-reliance. As demonstrated with the rise of populism in advanced economies.{10}

Should we quit telling stories altogether? We are too enlightened for stories, right? As Chatraw says, “Human



potentiality is reached not by giving up on stories, which we can't really do, but by embracing the true story of the world—the story that elucidates all other stories.”[\[11\]](#) More on that true story later.

Back to globalism and the desire to return to traditions. What is really happening in culture, and what Bakhtiari does not fully grasp, is that we are in a trance from materialism. There is a collective yearning to connect with the transcendent, a reminiscence for an enchanted universe, something past the usual, that will not leave us. This is what the return to tradition is about. Therefore, Gen Zs are fascinated by Y2k fashion and things of the past.

Therefore, there is an obsession with Mason jars. Moderns assert all is matter, while they show a profound desire to relate to something outside the physical earth. The outcome is a silly and eventually inadequate effort to discover meaning, purpose, and identity in dull obsessions.

What this reveals about how our culture thinks is that we are “sensate,” as philosopher Paul Gould has articulated.[\[12\]](#) We are obsessed with the material and the physical to the exclusion of the immaterial and spiritual. As C.S Lewis has portrayed, we are concentrating on the “stream of experience.”[\[13\]](#) Gould has said, “Our whole education system trains us to fix our minds upon the material world.”[\[14\]](#) We turn out to be obsessed with the now, with lack of thinking of the past (hence the attempted solution to connect with the past via Y2K fashion). The thinking of our culture is superficial and absent of skill to think truly around issues that really matter . . . just look at social media. Most people are driven to a greater extent by emotion and want than by good sense.

It is one thing to think thoughts, but another to live out actions. I just heard on the news the other night an attorney shared her favorite quote that went something like, “It is one

thing to think about your values, it is entirely different to live them. That shows what you believe.” So how does our culture live? What do people believe? Looking to Gould’s analysis again, he argues we are hedonistic.[{15}](#) We go from one craving to the next, stuffing ourselves with delights that supply an instant carnal gratification, which turn out either to be a passing flame or new addiction. We have a robust wish to improve fairness, defend the weak and persecuted, and fulfill the wants of all persons. This appeal eventually drops short though, as we hold a disillusioned picture of life and have adopted the parallel principles of greed, decadence, and utilitarianism.

## Allure

I hypothesize there is something deeper going on with the desire to return to traditions. The reason Gen Zs and others are becoming obsessed with the past is because it awakens a desire for transcendence. 90s sitcoms take us back and ask us to travel in the direction of the target of our yearning. In the mystical autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recalls three initial events where he roused a yearning for the divine.[{16}](#) His earliest event of deep yearning was “the memory of a memory.” While he paused near a currant bush on a summer day there unexpectedly began in him “the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House—when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery.”[{18}](#) Before in his biography, Lewis had depicted the toy garden as “the first beauty I ever knew.”[{19}](#) While Lewis remained gazing away at the scenery, a feeling similar to “enormous bliss” swirled in him.[{20}](#) His recollection of that previous recollection stirred inside him a natural yearning for beauty.

Lewis’s next installment of passionate longing happened after he read Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*. While he read the tale, Lewis was unsettled “with what I can only describe as the Idea of Autumn.”[{21}](#) Once more, his feelings and his

yearnings were taken to something lost from his life. A third peek of inspiration arrived out of poetry. While he casually flipped through Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf*, he fell upon this:

I heard a voice that cried,  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead{22}

Lewis writes, "I knew nothing about Balder; but I instantly was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote)." {23} Every one of these events had a little in common: "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy." {24} Note Lewis's yearning for the sublime (what he refers to as Joy) was roused out of a recollection of a toy garden, a tale, and a poem.

These are all images of some sort, whether recalled from the past or evoked from reading. James K.A. Smith says, "Our orientation to the world begins from, and lives off of, the fuel of our bodies, including the 'images' of the world that are absorbed by our bodies." {25} Frequently it is the "aesthetic currency of the imagination—story, poetry, music, symbols, and images" {26} that awaken our desire for the transcendent. In a strange way, I think the "return to traditions" examples Bakhtiari uses such as fashion, wired headphones, and sitcoms represent different memories, symbols, and images that evoke "traditional" feelings for Gen Zs, that are a call to return home—that is the transcendent source.

## **We Cannot Get Home on Our Own**

I think Gen Zs, by returning to traditions, are trying to find their path home by chasing (old) possessions. This method is a stalemate. This self-redemption proposal fails since it does not properly identify the underlying trouble. Our trouble is

not a shortage of junk. Our trouble is transgression: humankind is justly guilty to God and merits conviction and accusation. The result of human transgression is death—separation from God. There is no self-redemption, no path home on our own. This is awful news.

Only God, who is wealthy in compassion, has worked out something for man. This is great news: God's answer to mortal disaster—His salvage strategy. This strategy climaxed in the coming of Jesus, His death on the cross that paid the price of transgression for man, and His resurrection proving He is God. Jesus offers us a path home. Jesus declares, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."<sup>{27}</sup> C.S. Lewis says, "The thing you long for summons you away from self. . . . Out of our selves, into Christ, we must go."<sup>{28}</sup> Gould said, "Paradoxically, if we aim for home and happiness, we won't find it. We must instead aim at something else—or better, *someone* else—and along the way, we will find shalom."<sup>{29}</sup> As Jesus spoke,

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?<sup>{30}</sup>

You will either receive the joy and home God gives, or perpetually go hungry. The choice is yours.

## Notes

1.

[www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f)

2.

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9. Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 65.

10.

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17. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16.
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20. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16.
21. Ibid.
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23. Ibid.
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25. James K.A. Smith, *Imaging the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 17.
26. James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 129.
27. *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), John 14:6.
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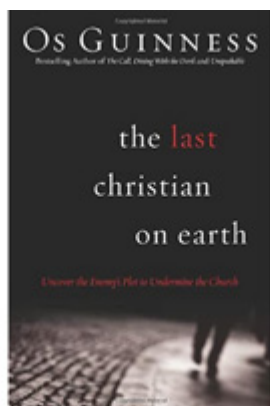
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# Digging Our Own Grave: The Secular Captivity of the Church



*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.*

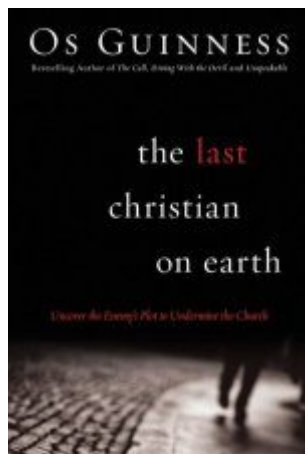
## Our Real Enemy

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 sudden captivity.”[\[2\]](#)

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.<sup>{3}</sup>

*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”<sup>{4}</sup>).

*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?"[\[5\]](#)

## 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.[\[6\]](#) 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

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  4. Ibid.
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  7. Ibid., 63.
  8. Ibid., 72.
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  12. Ibid., 138.
  13. Ibid., 155.
  14. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday, 1973,), 449; quoted in Guinness, *Last Christian*, 79.
  15. Guinness, *Last Christian*, 166.
  16. Ibid., 213.
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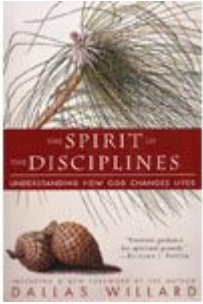
# Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

*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.*



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

# 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"?



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 . . .”[\[9\]](#) 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.”[{10}](#) 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.”[{11}](#)

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.”[{12}](#) 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

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.
9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

# The Best of All Possible Worlds?

*T.S. Weaver makes a case for 18th-century philosopher Leibniz's contention that this fallen world is still the best of all possible worlds.*

This world is just as embedded with pain and suffering as it is with beauty and joy. Can this world possibly be the best of all possible worlds?

18th-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz contended that it is.

In his book *Theodicy* (published in 1710<sup>[1]</sup>), he makes the very distinctive defense for the existence of God in view of the problem of evil.<sup>[2]</sup> ("Theodicy," combining the Greek words for God and justice, is the theological term for addressing the problem of how a good and just God can allow evil in His creation.)

One of the strengths of Leibniz's theodicy is how straightforward and precise it is. It is also traditionally recognized as one of his highly essential contributions to philosophy of religion. The place to start is God's omniscience (not evil). This allows God to understand all possibilities. <sup>[3]</sup> If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. God is likewise completely good and so constantly aspires the best and continuously performs in the best way. Leibniz writes, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: *God wants to choose the most perfect.*" <sup>[4]</sup> The power of the best-of-all possible-worlds theodicy is to show God's decision to generate this world out of every world that he could have produced, *for this creation is good.* <sup>[5]</sup>

Leibniz ties in several principles to the theodicy. The first



major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes God understands the value of every world possible prior to deciding which one to produce. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."[{6}](#) Leibniz purports,

Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a great good; and there would be something to correct in the actions (so, the omnipotence) of God if it were possible to do better.[{7}](#)

To believe God can intercede in what He has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be akin to a soldier who abandons his post during a war to stop a colleague from perpetrating a slight violation.[{8}](#) In other words, when we sometimes think God should have restricted a certain evil, the argument is that He could actually be guarding against a greater evil we are unaware of instead.

Leibniz does not leave the principle of sufficient reason to fend for itself. Instead, he reinforces the best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy with the principle of "pre-established harmony." He describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we *should* see, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best." [{9}](#) In other words, God performs corresponding to divine perfection and liberty, decides to produce, commands creation corresponding to this nature, and then can choose a world that includes evil. Living in the best of all possible worlds entails the world comprising the best goods out of any, with the greatest harmony. Jill Graper Hernandez states, "The mere existence of humans in creation requires that humans may

choose certain evil acts, and this is harmonious with God's perfection of intellect and will."[\[10\]](#)

This hints at the one last, ethical, principle of Leibniz's best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy: God's creation includes human free will. For Leibniz, human freedom is vital to grasp how God's permission of evil is coherent with divine flawlessness and to grasp how God avoids ethical condemnation for letting evil into the best possible world.

Free or intelligent substances possess something greater and more marvelous, in a kind of imitation of God. For they are not bound by any certain subordinate laws of the universe, but act by a private miracle as it were, on the sole initiative of their own power.[\[11\]](#)

A better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly. While free will can ensue in evil (the risk), for humans to have the capability to be ethically good, or to build virtues, or to develop spiritually, free will is necessary. Human ethical integrity hangs on our capability to freely choose the good. His generosity makes freedom conceivable and makes it possible for His creation to pursue Him. By wanting the best, God gives the prospect some creatures will decide to behave corruptly.

Yet, since its publication over three hundred years ago, Leibniz's theodicy has had enduring condemnation. Two of the most troubling are about the existence of "natural evil" (suffering from catastrophes in nature) and whether God could have formed a world with less powerful evils and less free will. The first is insidious because in most cases, seemingly only God could avoid natural catastrophes and the suffering that comes from them. Yet I think Leibniz would argue, given the understanding of his theodicy, we must trust that God has given us the best despite natural evils.

The second critique is obvious on its face to nearly everyone.

One cannot help but wonder if this world is the best there could be, and if this is the best God could do. It appears there might be cases in which God should intercede to avoid suffering from atrocious evil, for example the Holocaust. As difficult as it is to accept, this critique interferes with the coherence of the principle of free will. This thinking does not declare we cannot *imagine* a world in which there is no Holocaust, or no evil at all. Even Leibniz concedes that point, but he argues, "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness." [\[12\]](#)

In summary, our world is the consequence of the merging of God's flawlessness and liberty, though the world includes flaws. Although this established world is not flawless, it is the best possible, and so it would be unfeasible for God to build a better world or to intercede in the world to avoid or restrict pain. A great God would produce only the best. Because this is the world God formed, this is the best. This theodicy has stayed philosophically persuasive for several reasons, starting with its genuine logical and practical influence. The theodicy protects theistic flawlessness despite evil in the world because the problem of evil does not prove the theist keeps conflicting ideas that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent and makes a world where his creatures morally fall. Additionally, Leibniz's theodicy protects free will, which is crucial for theists who think love and worship are needed to have freedom. This too is important for Leibniz to show God cannot be ethically responsible when people choose what is evil. Also, we understand the best of all possible worlds involves the ultimate extermination of sin and suffering (achieved through Christ's earthly work in the past and in His return and rule in the future).

Leibniz's theodicy proves the steadiness of God forever

selecting the best with this world really being the best of all possible worlds, whilst meeting the atheist's challenge that a great God must be kept ethically accountable for the existence of evil. I argue the theodicy is helpful to inspire individuals to love God, to take solace from His divine providence and to urge them to use their free will to choose to pursue God. Leibniz magnifies this point:

Whether one succeeds or not in this task, one is content with what comes to pass, being resigned to the will of God and knowing what he wills is best. When we are in this benevolent state of mind, we are not disheartened by failure, we regret only our faults, and the ungrateful way of men causes no relaxation in the exercise of our kindly disposition.[\[13\]](#)

Taking all this into account, we can trust God is giving us His very best with this world, and in our individual existential lives, even when we can imagine better circumstances or outcomes. This ought to give us a sense of peace and gratitude knowing our Heavenly Father is not giving us the short end of the stick in any way. He loves us and cares for us. And that free will He gave us—if we are not using it to worship Him, we need to reconsider what we're using it for.

## Notes

1. This was the first book-length philosophical consideration of this problem.
2. Jill Graper Hernandez, *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. Chad Meister, James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 95.
3. Each possibility is a new sphere, or world, of possibility that varies from the world we presently occupy. A possible world comprises an extensive idea of God's intelligence that completely explains what could have happened if that world was generated (Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence," *Leibniz Review* [2007], 33).

4. G.W. Leibniz, "On Freedom and Spontaneity," Academy ed., VI 4-b, 1454 in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, ed. Lloyd Strickland (New York: Continuum, 2006)
5. God describes everything He created as "good." See Genesis 1.
6. Hernandez, 100.
7. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), II. 8.
8. Causa Dei, in *Leibniz: Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
9. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), I. 44.
10. Hernandez, 101.
11. *On Necessity and Contingency*, in *Samtliche schriften und breife*, ser. VI, vol. 4 (Halle, Germany: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923), pp. 1449-50; "Philosophical Writings"), ed. G.H.R. Parkinson, trans. M. Morris (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 100.
12. Leibniz, preface.
13. Ibid.

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