

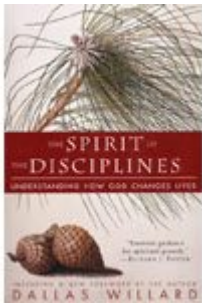
Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

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.

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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^[1]), he makes the very distinctive defense for the existence of God in view of the problem of evil.^[2] ("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. ^[3] 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.*" {4} 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.* {5}

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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Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

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

and respond to them as an informed Christian.

Help! My Doubts Scare Me!

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



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

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

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

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we'll probably *all* have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As

Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, “Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt.”^{2} Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they’re largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is *really* inspired by God or that Jesus was *really* born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.^{3}

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, “A faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end.”^{4}

It’s Not All in Your Head!

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person’s doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it’s important to realize that “doubt is never a purely intellectual problem.” Like it or not, there’s always a “spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized.”^{5} Because of this, sometimes a person’s objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the *real* reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at

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

In this case all the student's reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn't want God meddling in his affairs. He didn't want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person's intellectual objections to Christianity are *rarely* the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, "A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God." [\[6\]](#)

Unfortunately, Christians aren't immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who's now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he's currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he's disobeying God. Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we'll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.

I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

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

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

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

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

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word

of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

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

Faith and Reason

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

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

Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these

other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.{13}

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

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

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

Stepping into the Light

We've seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We've also seen that such doubts are never *just* an intellectual issue; there's *always* a spiritual dynamic that's involved as well. But since

we'll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on the light!

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 316.
2. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 31.
3. Lynn Anderson, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 322.
4. Ibid., 326.
5. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 33.
6. Ravi Zacharias, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 343. See also John 3:19-21.
7. Mark 9:14-24.
8. See Mark 9:25-29.
9. Sue Bohlin, “I’m Having a Terrible Battle in My Mind,” Probe Ministries, probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/.
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 35-39.
12. Ibid., 35.
13. Ibid., 36.
14. See John 16:7-11.
15. Alvin Plantinga, “The Foundations of Theism: A Reply,” *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 310; cited in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 38-39.
16. Ibid., 39.
17. Merrill C. Tenney, “The Gospel of John,” in *The*

Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebeline, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 84.

18. John 8:32.

19. Dallas Willard, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 352.

20. Psalm 34:8.

21. See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

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

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

Peter – A Leader in Apologetics

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



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

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

1. Peter recognized the evidence pointing to Jesus as the Christ early on. When others doubted Jesus' teaching, Peter declared, "To whom shall we go, you (Jesus) have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). As an eyewitness of Jesus' teaching, signs and miracles, Peter, through the Father's revelation of His Son, went on to declare, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16).
2. Beginning at Pentecost, Peter took on the role as the primary spokesperson presenting a reasoned argument for the gospel before the Jewish masses, the Jewish authorities and the first Gentile converts.
3. It appears that Peter was the one Paul approached to discuss his theology and arguments for the gospel before Paul began sharing them with the entire Roman world (Galatians 1:18). In his second epistle, Peter equates the letters of Paul with the "rest of Scripture," giving them his approval as "God breathed" (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1:20-21).
4. Peter is the one that commanded us to be prepared to give an effective, reasoned argument for our faith, introducing the term "apologetics" to our vocabulary as important for every believer as he told the believers in Asia, "always

being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

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

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

Peter’s Defense – Credible Witnesses for the Gospel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Addressing a Jewish audience, Peter did not have to defend the credibility or accuracy of the Scriptures as you may be

compelled to do today. But when he addressed the church in Asia, he wrote, "So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). He pointed out that his eyewitness experience with Jesus gives him even greater confidence in the Scriptures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter's Defense – Compelling Evidence for the Gospel

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

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

signs.”

2. Jesus suffered a highly public death by crucifixion.

3. God raised Him up again.

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

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

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

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

Jesus' resurrection is the heart of the gospel and of any defense of the gospel. Consequently, it is the central theme of Peter's message. [\[3\]](#)

Peter's Defense – Confronting Objections with Consistent Reasoning

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

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

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

The second objection is that the Scriptures do not teach the resurrection of the dead. The Jews were looking for a descendant of David who would reign forever as the Messiah. Peter used Psalms written by David to show that the God had

revealed that the Messiah would die but not be abandoned to Hades or suffer decay and be raised to sit at the right hand of God (Psalm 16:8-11; 132:11; 110:1).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter's Defense – The Testimony of Changed Lives

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

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

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

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

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

These living arguments are essential elements supporting any effective argument explaining our living hope in Jesus. Peter put it this way: “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is

in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame (1 Peter 3:15-16). A good conscience and good behavior are directly tied to the effectiveness of our defense. Peter also highlights the importance of presenting our argument with gentleness and a genuine concern and respect for the other person as someone created in the image of God and loved by Jesus.

Peter's Defense – A Clear Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

To the church in Asia, he reminded, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great

mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

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

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

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

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

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on Jesus’ example, check out Pat Zukeran’s “The Apologetics of Jesus,” probe.org/apologetics-of-jesus) and other resources at probe.org.
2. For more resources explaining our confidence in the Bible as a reliable witness, check out Pat Zukeran’s “Authority of the Bible” (probe.org/authority-of-the-bible) and other resources by going to probe.org/radio.
3. To find out more information on the compelling evidence for the Resurrection and its importance in making a reasoned argument for the gospel, see Steve Cable’s, “The Answer is the Resurrection” (probe.org/answer-is-the-resurrection) and other resources available at probe.org/radio.

Why Bible Study Matters

Tom Davis builds a case for why we should study the Bible, drawing on both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures.

Does it matter if we study the Bible?

I recently encountered an article claiming it doesn't. The author claimed that Christians are not feeding the poor, helping the downtrodden, seeking justice for the persecuted, or evangelizing people, because we are too busy studying our Bibles. (Interestingly, the article has since been removed, but the question remains.)

Is his concern valid? Approximately 16% of people in the United States read their Bible most days during the week.^{1} A 2014 article in *Christianity Today* states, "The average length of time spent studying the Bible was between 10 and 20 minutes per session."^{2} According to Probe's 2020 religion survey, "Only one out of five Born Again Christians ages 18 through 29 pray daily, attend church at least monthly, and read the Bible at least weekly."^{3} The statistics indicate that the average amount of time Christians spend reading their Bible cannot be what is keeping Christians from sharing their faith, helping those in need, or helping the homeless.

Another issue that the author raised is that the early church did not have an authoritative list of New Testament books for more than three hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. I am unsure how these historical facts show that anyone today is spending too much time reading their Bible. Are we better off when we have all the books of the Bible? Would these early Christians have preferred having all the books of the Bible? Would they want to stick with having parts of the Old

Testament, a Gospel or two, and a few of the epistles? I think they would be confused why this pastor thinks that Christians are spending too much time studying their Bible.

What the Old Testament Says About Reading the Bible

One way we can figure out the role that studying the Bible should play in the life of the Christian is to look at what the Bible says about reading the Scriptures. We should start with the Old Testament. The first passage to examine is:

These words I am commanding you today must be kept in mind, and you must teach them to your children and speak of them as you sit in your house, as you walk along the road, as you lie down, and as you get up. You should tie them as a reminder on your forearm and fasten them as symbols on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorframes of your houses and gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NET)

God is preparing to lead the Hebrews into the promised land. He tells the people that they are to remember the covenant, teach the covenant to their children, and place inscriptions from the covenant in prominent places in their homes. Knowing and teaching the commands of God is so important that this charge is repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18-23.

Peter Cousins states, "Not only is it to be upon the heart . . . it must take first place in training children, in conversation (at home and outside) from the beginning to the end of the day; it should govern the senses, control behavior, and direct life in the home and community."[\[4\]](#) The words of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people are so important that the words have to be known and understood. That requires study. Knowing the covenant is so important that the Hebrew people are commanded to decorate their walls, doorframes, and gates. The people are even commanded to have the words of the covenant on their clothes. All of this

indicates that God intends for His people to know and follow His commands, and that this is done by studying them. Even the people who could not read would memorize the law. (Ancient cultures operated from an oral tradition; people were used to hearing, memorizing, and repeating stories and passages from verbal input alone.) To be fair, few Jews would have been able to recite the first five books of the Bible from memory, but they would have been able to recite long passages of Scripture.

The most common passage that was most often recited was the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You must love the LORD your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus said this is God's greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). Jews would pray the Shema several times a day. This is the passage most often found on doorposts and in houses in archaeological digs.

As the people prepare to enter the land promised to them, God makes provisions for a future King. The responsibilities and conduct of the king are:

When he sits on his royal throne he must make a copy of this law on a scroll given to him by the Levitical priests. It must be with him constantly, and he must read it as long as he lives, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and observe all the words of this law and these statutes and carry them out. (Deuteronomy 17:18-19 NET)

Here we can see that the king does not make the law. God gave the law to Moses. The Levitical priests were to copy the law and teach it to the people. The priests were also tasked with giving the king a copy of the law so that the king could carry out God's law. The King is under the authority of the priests and of God. The king is not allowed to make his own law, he must be obedient to God. [\[5\]](#)

As Joshua leads the people into the promised land God tells him, "This law scroll must not leave your lips. You must memorize it day and night so you can carefully obey all in it. Then you will prosper and be successful" (Joshua 1:8 NET). Even before a king was installed over the people, the leaders of Israel were to lead God's people according to the law so they could be successful in following God.

As Israel moved into the land God had promised them, they became corrupt. The priests did not teach the kings or the people. God sent prophets to the people to call them back to living faithfully to the covenant. The people would not keep the covenant they made with God, and the priests would not teach the law to the people. God, in the book of Hosea, tells the priests:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I will reject you from serving as my priest.
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I will also forget your sons. (Hosea 4:6 CSB)

Despite all of these warnings, Israel was not faithful in following God. David Allan Hubbard summarizes the situation, "The collapse of the priests and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction."[\[6\]](#) The priests were not teaching the people or the kings. This led to God sending the people into exile and the destruction of the Temple in Israel. As a result of a lack of faithfulness and a lack of knowledge of God's law, Israel was separated from God.

What the New Testament Says About Reading the Bible

The Gospels tell us that after his baptism Jesus has a 40-day fast followed by a confrontation with Satan. This involved Satan tempting Jesus by quoting scripture, and Jesus rebukes

him by quoting Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). New Testament Scholar Craig Keener gives the following description: "This text also shows that Jesus does not just use Scripture to accommodate contemporary views of its authority; he uses it as his authority and the final word on ethics even when dealing with a supracultural adversary."[\[7\]](#) While the Bible was written by people living in cultures that existed in real places and real times in the past, the morality taught within scripture is not restricted by those historical and cultural settings. As Jesus' followers, we need to understand what is expected of us morally. In order to know Christian morality, we must study the Bible.

The Gospels also show that Jesus had debates concerning what was taught in the Scriptures. These debates often included not just morality, but the identity of the Messiah, and the power of God. In one debate Jesus tells the Sadducees, "You are deceived because you don't know the scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29 NET). The Sadducees did not know the scriptures because they only studied the first five books of the Bible. They didn't know the power of God because they rejected the resurrection. Stanley Horton writes, "Those who do not really know what the scriptures teach, nor God's omnipotent power cannot avoid going astray."[\[8\]](#)

In another debate with the Pharisees Jesus said, "You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life" (John 5:39, 40 NET). The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they saw him as a threat. Jesus had undermined their authority and threatened their position in the culture, so they were obstinate. Keener states, "They believed that one had eternal life through the scriptures; but Jesus says that the Scriptures witness to him, hence to reject him is to disobey the Scriptures."[\[9\]](#) By rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees unintentionally rejected the Scriptures. By

rejecting Jesus, they could not possess eternal life.

In the book of Acts, we see Jesus' disciples proclaiming to everyone who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah and was raised from the dead. This led to debates and conflicts with the Jewish authorities. In Acts chapter seven Stephen accuses the Jewish council that they failed to follow the scriptures. In chapter eight Philip leads an Ethiopian eunuch to faith by starting with a passage in Isaiah and telling him about the gospel of Jesus. Later in Acts Paul met repeatedly with a group of Jews. Acts

describes the Bereans as "more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11 NET). The reaction of the Bereans is not emotional. They investigated the scriptures intellectually to see what was true.[{10}](#)

In his letters Paul addresses why God gave us the scriptures. In Romans Paul writes, "For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope" (Romans 15:4). John Murray comments, "In Paul's esteem Scripture in all its parts is for our instruction, that the Old Testament was designed to furnish us in these last days with the instruction necessary for the fulfillment of our vocation to the end, and that it is as written it promotes this purpose."[{11}](#) Part of being on fire for Christ is fulfilling our vocation. The primary way we know what our vocation is and how we can fulfill it is through studying our Bible.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul doubles down on the benefits of studying scripture. Paul reminds Timothy that he was taught the scriptures while he was a child. Then Paul writes, "Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable

and equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul is reminding Timothy that scripture has authority because it comes from God. Scripture is good for learning about God and ethics. The Jews have this benefit, but the Christians have a better understanding because Jesus taught the Apostles, which gave them a better understanding of the scriptures than that of the Jews.[{12}](#)

The last passage that I would like to examine is in Revelation. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near!" (Revelation 1:3). While this verse is speaking specifically about people who read Revelation, by logical extension we are blessed any time we read any part of the scripture. All scripture is given by God, therefore when you read any part of scripture you will be blessed. What does it mean to be blessed by reading scripture? Earl F. Palmer answers, "It does not express superficial sentiment but instead the rugged and tested assurance that it is a good thing to be walking in the pathway of God's will."[{13}](#) Our obedience to scripture brings blessing. We cannot be obedient to scripture without studying the Bible.

Conclusion

In one sense the author of the article I mentioned was correct. If we spend so much time studying the Bible that Christians never feed the hungry, help the poor, make disciples for Christ, or work to bring justice to the downtrodden then we are neglecting part of what we were commanded to do. But how can we even know that Christ commands us to do those things if we do not study the Bible?

In the examination of what the Bible says about Bible study, we can see that Bible study is an indispensable part of the Christian life. We can see in Deuteronomy that God commanded the Hebrews to memorize and obey the Law. When they failed to

do this, they were ultimately exiled by God. Jesus reprimanded the Sadducees and the Pharisees for not knowing and believing the scriptures. Paul and John taught that Christians would be blessed by studying the scriptures.

The reason we are blessed when we study the Bible is that when we study, we develop and form a Christian worldview. The story shapes our values, our morals, and the way we live. The way we think about the people and the world around us is changed by studying scripture. One other aspect is that when we study the Bible, we enter into the glory of God. When we study the Bible, we are in God's presence in the same way as when we are praying. Studying the Bible is an act of worship.[{14}](#)

Finally, studying the Bible is how we obey the command in Ephesians 5:10 to "find out what pleases the Lord." Since the greatest commandment is to love God (Matthew 22:37) as noted above, how can we love Him without knowing what pleases Him? And since we find that God's love language is obedience (John 14:15), how can we discern what to obey without studying His word? How can we avoid sin if we have never studied the Bible to find out what sin is?

How can Christians implement Bible study into a busy 40-hour work week and taking care of kids and spending time with their spouse? You do not have to spend hours a day studying. Spend ten or fifteen minutes in the morning or at night to read the Bible. Take five minutes of your lunch break to read a chapter. If you are so busy that you cannot study during the work week, find fifteen minutes to study on your day off. Whatever amount of time you spend studying the Bible, God will honor and bless you for that time.

Notes

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2. [Evangelicals admit struggling to find time for daily](#)

[Bible reading and prayer \(christiantoday.com\)](http://christiantoday.com)

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Secularization and the Church in Europe

Christian beliefs and church attendance are playing a much smaller role in Europeans' lives in general than in the past. Rick Wade gives a snapshot of the place and nature of Christianity in Europe.

At the end of a talk about the state of the evangelical mind in America, the subject turned to Europe, and a man said with great confidence, "The churches in Europe are all empty!" I've heard that said before. It makes for a good missions sermon; however, it doesn't quite do justice to the situation. Not *all* the churches in Europe are empty! The situation isn't like in Dallas, Texas, where churches dot the landscape, but there are thriving churches across the continent.



That said, however, there is more than just a grain of truth in the claim. Church attendance in Europe *is* down. Traditional Christian beliefs *are* less widely held.

It's important to know what the situation is in Europe for a few reasons.

First, we have a tendency to write Europe off in a way we don't other parts of the world. The church is struggling there, but it isn't a lost cause by any means! Maybe we can even *learn* from the thinking and life's experience of believers across the Atlantic.

Second, learning about the church around the world is good because it broadens our understanding of the interaction of Christianity and society. This should be of interest to us

here in America.

Let's look at a few numbers in the area of church attendance. To provide a contrast with the situation today, the best estimate for church attendance in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was between forty and sixty percent of the adult population.[{1}](#) By contrast, in 2007, ten percent attended church at least weekly. About a quarter of those (about two million people) self-identify as evangelicals.[{2}](#) Although there has been large growth in so-called "new churches," that growth hasn't offset the loss across other denominations, especially the Church of England.

What about some other countries? In 2004, Gallup reported that "weekly attendance at religious services is below 10% in France and Germany, while in Belgium, the Netherlands, [and] Luxembourg . . . between 10% and 15% of citizens are regular churchgoers. . . . Only in Roman Catholic Ireland do a majority of residents (54%) still go to church weekly."[{3}](#)

As we'll see later, reduced numbers in church doesn't mean all religious belief—even Christian—is lost.

The Golden Age of Faith

There is a story of the prominence and demise of religion in Europe that has become standard fare for understanding the history of Christianity in the modern world. The story goes that Europe was once a Christian civilization; that everyone was a Christian, and that the state churches ensured that society as a whole was Christian. This was the so-called "golden age of faith." With the shift in thinking in the Enlightenment which put man at the center of knowledge, and which saw the rise of science, it became clear to some that religion was really just a form of superstition that gave pre-modern people an explanation of the world in which they lived and gave them hope.[{4}](#)

This story has come under a lot of fire in recent decades.[{5}](#) Although the churches had political and social power, there was no uniform religious belief across Europe. In fact, it's been shown that there was a significant amount of paganism and folk magic mixed in with Christian beliefs.[{6}](#) Many priests had the barest notions of Christian theology; a lot of them couldn't even read.[{7}](#) Sociologist Philip Gorski says that it's more accurate to call it an Age of Magic or an Age of Ritual than an Age of Belief.[{8}](#)

On the other side of this debate are scholars such as Steve Bruce who say that, no matter the content or nature of religious belief in the Middle Ages, people were still *religious* even if not uniformly *Christian*; they believed in the supernatural and their religious beliefs colored their entire lives. "The English peasants may have often disappointed the guardians of Christian orthodoxy," Bruce writes, "but they were indubitably religious."[{9}](#)

So what changed? Was there a loss of Christianity or a loss of religion in general, or just some kind of shift? Historian Timothy Larson believes that what has been lost is *Christendom*.[{10}](#) The term *Christendom* is typically used to refer to the West when it was dominated by Christianity. The change wasn't really from religion to irreligion but from the dominance of Christianity to its demise as a dominant force.

Religion has come back with significant force in recent decades even in such deeply secular countries as France, primarily because of the influx of Muslims.[{11}](#) Although the state Christian churches are faltering, some founded by immigrants are doing well, such as those founded by Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England. It seems that critics sounded the death knell on religion too soon.

European Distinctives

Although Christian belief is on the demise in general in Europe, the institutional church—the state church specifically—still has a valuable place in society.

In Europe's past, the church was a major part of people's lives. Everyone was baptized, married, and buried in the church. That tradition is still such a part of the social psyche that people fully expect that the church will be there for them even if they don't attend. Sociologist Grace Davie describes the church in this respect as a *public utility*. "A public utility," she writes, "is available to the population as a whole at the point of need and is funded through the tax system."[\[12\]](#) Fewer people are being married in churches now, and far fewer are being baptized. However, there's still a sense of need for the church at the time of death along with the expectation that it will be there for them.

Another term that characterizes religion in Europe is *vicarious religion*. Vicarious religion is "religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who . . . understand [and] approve of what the minority is doing." Church leaders are expected to believe certain things, perform religious rituals, and embody a high moral code. "English bishops," Davie writes, "are rebuked . . . if they doubt in public; it is, after all, their 'job' to believe." She reports an incident where a bishop was thought to have spoken derogatorily about the resurrection of Jesus. He was "widely pilloried" for that, she writes. Soon after his consecration as bishop, his church was struck by lightning. That was seen by some as a rebuke by God![\[13\]](#)

Another indicator of the importance of the church in European life is the fact that, in some countries, people still pay church tax, even countries that are very secular. Germany is one example. People can opt out, but a surprisingly high number don't, including some who are not religiously

affiliated. Reasons include the possibility of needing the church sometime later in life, having a place to provide moral guidance for children, and the church's role in positively influencing the moral fabric of society in general.[{14}](#)

From Doctrine to Spirituality

I described above two concepts that characterize religious life in parts of Europe: *public utility* and *vicarious religion*. There's a third phrase sociologists use which points to the shift in emphasis from what one gets through the institutional church to personal spiritual experience. The phrase is "believing without belonging."

Sociologist Peter Berger believes that, as America is less religious than it seems, Europe is less secular than it seems. "A lot goes on under the radar," he writes.[{15}](#)

A phrase often heard *there* is heard more and more frequently in the States: "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual." This could mean the person is into New Age thinking, or is interested in more conventional religion but doesn't feel at home in a church or in organized religion, or just prefers to choose what to believe him- or herself. A term some use to characterize this way of thinking is "patchwork religion."

One frequently finds a greater acceptance of religion in Europe when religion in *general* is the subject and not particular, creedal religions. Davie notes that "[generally speaking] if you ask European populations . . . do you believe in God, and you're not terribly specific about the God in question, you'll get about 70 percent saying yes, depending where you are. If you say, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, you'll get a much lower number. In other words, if you turn your question into a creedal statement, the percentages go down." A "cerebral" kind of belief doesn't hold much appeal to the young. The essence of religious experience isn't so much what you learn as it is simply taking part.

“It’s the fact that you’re lifted out of yourself that counts.”[\[16\]](#)

The loss of authority in the state church hasn’t resulted in the triumph of secular rationalism among young people, which is rather surprising. They experiment with religious beliefs. “The rise occurred right across Europe,” Davie notes, “but is most marked in those parts of Europe where the institutional churches are at their weakest.” This isn’t seen, however, “where the church is still strong and seen as a disciplinary force and is therefore rejected by young people.”[\[17\]](#)

Some Closing Thoughts

Allow me to make some observations about the subject of secularization and the church in Europe.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as we face a Western culture that is increasingly hostile to the Gospel. First, we routinely hear the charge from people that religious people are living in the past, that they need to catch up to modern times. Such people simply assume as obviously true the long-held theory that secularization necessarily follows from modernization. This theory is sharply disputed today. Europe’s history isn’t the history of the rest of the world. Modernization appears in different forms around the world, including some that have room for religious belief and practice. America is a prime example. It isn’t the backward exception to the rule, as haughty critics would have us believe. Some say it’s *Europe* that is the exception with its strong secularity.[\[18\]](#) In fact, I think a case can be made that the modern propensity to separate our spiritual side from our material one is artificial; it violates our nature. But that’s a subject for another time. What we can be sure of is that the condescending attitude of people who want Christians to catch up to modern times is without basis. There is no necessary connection between modernity and secularity.[\[19\]](#)

A second thing to keep in mind is that the church doesn't require a Christian society around it in order to grow. Christianity didn't have its beginnings in a Christian society, but it grew nonetheless. The wide-spread social acceptance of Christian beliefs and morality is not the power of God unto salvation. It is the word of the cross.

Third, religion per se will not disappear because we are made in God's image and He has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Christianity in particular will not die either, for the One who rose from the dead said even the gates of hell won't prevail against it (a much more serious adversary than the new atheists!).

What should we do? The same things Christians have always been called to do: continue in sound, biblical teaching, and learn and practice consistent Christian living. It is the way we live that, for many people, makes our beliefs plausible in the first place. And proclaim the gospel. Despite any constraints society may put on us, the Word of God is not bound.

Notes

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16. "Believing Without Belonging: Just How Secular Is Europe?" A discussion with Grace Davie at the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life, December 2005. pewforum.org/events/?EventID=97.

17. Ibid.

18. Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*.

19. Sociologist Christian Smith edited a volume titled *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (UC Press, 2003) in which the case was argued that secularization became so powerful here because of a concerted effort by people who wanted it, not because of some natural, teleological progression.

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Influential Intellectuals

Kerby Anderson examines four famous intellectuals—Rousseau, Marx, Russell and Sartre, looking for reasons they are worth following and not finding much.

Over the last two centuries, a few intellectuals have had a profound impact on Western Culture. British historian Paul Johnson writes about many of these influential intellectuals in his book, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky*. In this article, we will look at four of the better-known intellectuals whose influence continues to this day.



Paul Johnson reminds us that over the past two centuries, the influence of these secular intellectuals has grown steadily. He believes it is the key factor in shaping the modern world. In fact, this is really a new phenomenon. It was only the decline of clerical power in the eighteenth century that allowed these men to have a more significant influence in society.

Each secular intellectual “brought to this self-appointed task a far more radical approach than his clerical predecessors. He felt himself bound by no corpus of revealed religion.”^{1} For the first time, these intellectuals felt they alone could diagnose the ills of society and cure them without a need to refer to religion or past tradition.

One important characteristic of these new secular intellectuals was their desire to subject “religion and its protagonists to critical scrutiny.” And they pronounced harsh verdicts on priests and pastors about whether they could live up to their precepts.

After two centuries in which the influence of religion has declined and secular institutions have had a greater influence, Paul Johnson believes it is time to examine the record and influence of these secular intellectuals. In particular, he focuses on their moral and judgmental credentials. Do they have the right to tell the rest of us how to run our lives? How moral and just were they in their financial dealings and their sexual relationships? And how have their proposed systems stood up to the test of time?

I will give you a preview. These secular intellectuals lived decadent lives and mistreated so many people in their lives. Their proposed systems of politics, economics, and culture have been a failure and devastated millions of lives.

What a contrast to the Christian message. Jesus lived a sinless life (1 John 3:5) even though He was tempted as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus called on His disciples to follow Him (Matthew 4:19). Even the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul Johnson concludes his book with a number of examples of how some of these secular intellectuals addressed current

political and social issues. He also points out that these intellectuals saw no incongruity in moving from their own discipline (where they are masters) to public affairs (where they have no expertise). In the end, we discover that they “are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old.”[\[2\]](#)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a very influential intellectual. Many of our modern ideas of education were influenced to some degree by his treatise *Émile*. And even to this day many indirectly refer to some of his ideas found in the *Social Contract* that encapsulated his political philosophy.

Rousseau rejected the biblical narrative and instead believed that society was the reason we humans are defective. He argued, “When society evolves from its primitive state of nature to urban sophistication, man is corrupted.”[\[3\]](#)

Rousseau believed that you could improve human behavior (and even completely transform it) by changing the culture and the forces that produced it. In essence, he believed you can change human beings through social engineering.

He was, no doubt, a difficult person to be around and very egotistical. Paul Johnson explains that “part of Rousseau’s vanity was that he believed himself incapable of base emotions.”[\[4\]](#) He also had a great deal of self-pity for his circumstances and had “a feeling that he was quite unlike other men, both in his sufferings and his qualities.”[\[5\]](#)

Paul Johnson also reminds us that Rousseau “quarreled, ferociously and usually permanently, with virtually everyone with whom he had close dealings, and especially those who befriended him; and it is impossible to study the painful and repetitive tale of these rows without reaching the conclusion

that he was a mentally sick man.”{6}

Apparently, he cared little for those around him. For example, his foster-mother rescued him from destitution at least four times. But later when he did much better financially, and she became indigent, he did little for her.{7} His five children born to his mistress were abandoned to the orphanage hospital. He did not even know the dates of their births and took no interest in them.

Rousseau even acknowledged “that brooding on his conduct towards his children led him eventually to formulate theory of education he put forward in *Émile*. It also clearly helped to shape his *Social Contract*, published the same year.”{8}

The only woman who ever loved Rousseau summed him up this way: “He was a pathetic figure, and I treated him with gentleness and kindness. He was an interesting madman.”{9}

In this article we are studying some of these secular intellectuals because they have had such a profound impact on our world even today. But as we can already see from the life of Rousseau and will see from some of the other men we will discuss below, they lived decadent lives. They really had no business telling the rest of us how to live our lives.

Karl Marx

Paul Johnson concludes that Marx “has had more impact on actual events, as well as on the minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times.”{10}

Marx claimed that his philosophy was scientific. Paul Johnson disagrees and says it was not scientific. “He felt he had found a scientific explanation of human behavior in history akin to Darwin’s theology of evolution.”{11} Although Marx obtained a doctorate in philosophy he really wasn’t a scholar,

at least in the traditional sense. He actually spent more time organizing the Communist League and collecting material.

Paul Johnson says there were three strands in Marx: the poet, the journalist, and the moralist. He used poetic imagery which actually became part of his political vision. He was also a journalist and fairly good one at that. He also made use of aphorisms. Many of the most famous were borrowed from others. Two of the best known are: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," and "Religion is the opium of the people."

The moral impulse of Marx began with "his hatred of usury and moneylenders."[\[12\]](#) He believed that Jews had corrupted Christianity. His solution, therefore, was to abolish the Jewish attitude toward money. Ultimately, the Jews and the corrupted version of Christianity would disappear. Later Marx broadened his critique to blame the bourgeois class as a whole.

How did Marx treat others? "Marx quarreled with everyone with whom he associated" unless "he succeeded in dominating them completely."[\[13\]](#) He also collected elaborate dossiers about his political rivals and enemies."[\[14\]](#) Also, Marx "did not reject violence or even terrorism when it suited his tactics."[\[15\]](#) Later Lenin, Stalin, and Mao would practice such violence on an enormous scale.

Central to his hatred of capitalism was probably his incompetence in handling money. He never seriously attempted to get and hold down a job. Instead, Engels became the primary source of income for Marx and his family. In fact, Engels nearly ended the relationship when he once received a letter from Marx that virtually ignored the death of a woman Engels loved and focused the rest of the letter asking for money.

Life for his wife Jenny and their children was a nightmare. In time her jewelry ended up at the pawnshop. "Their beds were

sold to pay the butcher, milkman, chemist and baker.”{16} He even denied his daughters a satisfactory education. After his wife’s death, the family nursery-maid became his mistress and conceived a child whom Marx would never acknowledge. Once again, we see the decadent lives of these secular intellectuals.

Bertrand Russell

Paul Johnson says that “No intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell.”{17} His first book was published when Queen Victoria was still alive, and his last book came out the year Richard Nixon resigned because of Watergate. He also wrote countless newspaper and magazine articles. He wrote so much because he found writing to be so easy, and he was well paid for it.

Russell was an orphan, but his parents (who were atheists) left instructions for him to be brought up on the teaching of John Stuart Mill. His grandmother, however, would have none of it and raised him in an atmosphere of Bibles and Blue Books, taught by governesses and tutors. Nevertheless, he rejected religion as a teenager and remained an unbeliever the rest of his life.

“No man ever had a stronger confidence in the power of intellect, though he tended to see it almost as an abstract, disembodied force.”{18} For much “of his life he spent in telling the public what they ought to think and do, and this intellectual evangelism completely dominated the second half of his long life.”{19} On a number of occasions, he found himself in trouble with the law, being sued and fined for articles he wrote.

Paul Johnson remarked that “No one was more detached from physical reality than Russell. He could not work the simplest mechanical device or perform any of the routine tasks which

even the most pampered man does without thinking.”{20}

He said that the First World War caused him to revise the views he held about human behavior, in part because he could not understand how people’s emotions function in wartime. Reading him produced “a sense of wonder in the normal reader that so clever a man could be so blind to human nature.”{21}

Bertrand Russell believed “that the ills of the world could be largely solved by logic, reason, and moderation.” But here was his inconsistency. “When preaching his humanist idealism, Russell set truth above any other consideration. But in a corner, he was liable—indeed likely—to try to lie his way out of it.”{22}

As we have documented with other secular intellectuals, Russell also exploited women (especially his wives) as well as others who worked with him. This does seem to be a pattern. When students are required to read the works of many these men, they are never told about their lives. Although we are supposed to respect their intellect, once we study their lives we find that there was very little to respect.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Paul Johnson concludes that “no philosopher this century has had so direct an impact on the minds and attitudes of so many human beings, especially young people, all over the world.”{23} Existentialism was a popular philosophy for decades. His plays were hits. His books sold in the millions.

He grew up as a spoiled child (his father dying when he was fifteen months), with his grandfather giving him the run of his library and his mother providing for him a childhood “paradise.” He enjoyed one of the best educations and had a habit of reading three hundred books a year.

In some ways, World War II made Sartre, though the people

around him found little use for him. He “was notorious for never taking a bath and being disgustingly dirty. What he did was write.”[{24}](#) He didn’t do anything to save the Jews. Instead, he “concentrated relentlessly on promoting his own career. He wrote furiously, plays, philosophy and novels, mainly in cafés.”[{25}](#)

Sartre is known for the philosophy of existentialism, though the word was not his. The press invented it, and he came to embrace it. He proposed his philosophy of human freedom at a time when people were hungry for it. But he also meant that the existentialist individual must live without excuses. That is the why he wrote that “Man is condemned to be free.”

Sartre’s companion through life was Simone de Beauvoir, who was a brilliant writer and philosopher. But he treated her “as a mistress, surrogate wife, cook and manager, female bodyguard, and nurse.”[{26}](#) He was “the archetype of what in the 1960s became known as a male chauvinist.”[{27}](#) He had numerous sexual liaisons that came and went with some regularity.

Paul Johnson concludes that “Sartre, like Russell, failed to achieve any kind of coherence and consistency in his views on public policy. No body of doctrine survived him.”[{28}](#) Apparently he stood for very little other than to be linked to the liberal Left.

In this article we have taken a brief look at the lives of some of the secular intellectuals who have had an influence in the world. They still have some influence, and so it is worth asking if we should accept their prescriptions.

These men all lived decadent lives. Most of them mistreated people in their lives. But even more disturbing is the fact that they proposed systems of politics, economics, and culture that have been a failure and devastated millions of lives. They do not deserve the prominence they are often given in our

universities today. We are expected to revere them, but there is little in their lives to respect.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1988), 1.
2. Ibid., 34.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 10.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Ibid., 52.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 57.
13. Ibid., 70.
14. Ibid., 71.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Ibid., 197.
18. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 202.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 203.
23. Ibid., 225.
24. Ibid., 229.
25. Ibid., 230.
26. Ibid., 235.
27. Ibid., 236.
28. Ibid., 253.

Probe Survey 2020 Report 6: Nothing in Particulars and Biblical Views

Steve Cable analyzes Probe's 2020 Survey, examining beliefs of 'Nothing in Particulars' on salvation, biblical worldview, and sexual issues.

We want to examine the Unaffiliated and particularly those who selected Nothing in Particular (NIP) as their religious preference. As noted in [the first article of this series{1}](#), some researchers earlier in this century posited that many of the Nothing in Particulars were actually part of the Christian majority in America and would return to the fold as they aged. However, as shown in that article, this idea has not materialized as the young adults aged. Rather, the percentage of NIPs in each age group has grown as the age group has aged.

In this report, we will see how very different the beliefs of the NIPs are from those taught in the New Testament. We will look at this in three separate areas:

1. Salvation through Christ Alone.
2. A Biblical Worldview
3. Attitudes Concerning Sexual Issues

In these three areas, we will discover that most NIPs disagree with biblical teaching on these topics.

Reasons for Not Believing in Salvation Through Christ Alone

One question asked was "What keeps you from believing that

salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone?" Particularly for the Unaffiliated, we want to know whether it is a lack of knowledge or some other reason. When asked this question, the respondents could select from the following answers:

1. Never gave the question any thought.
2. Don't believe that God would take upon Himself the penalty for my sin.
3. Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned.
4. I am clearly as good as Christians I know so I should be accepted by God if they are.
5. There is no personal, creator God.
6. Another answer not listed here.
7. Not applicable, I do believe.

Figure 1 What keeps you from believing in salvation through Jesus alone: Ages 18 - 39



First let's consider how the various religious groups answered this question as shown in Figure 1. This data has already been discussed in [Report #4](#). But in the current

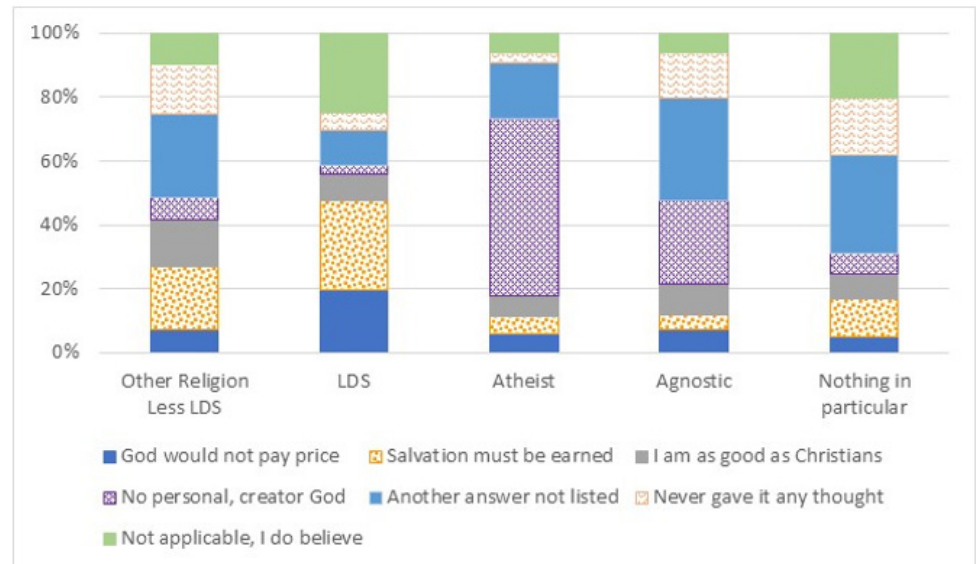
discussion, we want to focus on Other Religion and Unaffiliated. Respondents from Other Religions were most likely to select either "salvation must be earned" or "another answer not listed." A smaller percentage, just over 10%, selected "I am clearly as good as Christians I know. That answer appeared to be irrelevant to them.

On the other hand, the two largest segments selected by the

Unaffiliated were “no personal, creator God” and “another answer not listed.” Both groups had about 15% of their number select “Not applicable, I do believe.”

To get a better understanding of what drives these results, we dove further into the makeup of each of these two groups. The results are shown in Figure 2.[\[2\]](#)

Figure 2 What keeps you from believing in salvation through Jesus alone: Ages 18 - 39



We divided

Other Religions into the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and all other non-Christian religions. We divided the Unaffiliated into Atheist, Agnostic and Nothing in Particular. As shown, the LDS respondents are much more likely than other religions to select “salvation must be earned,” “I do believe,” and “God would not pay the price.” Almost one quarter of the LDS selected “I do believe” which explains how the Other Religion category showed about 15% with that answer. So we see that a strong majority of LDS people believe that they must do something more than believing in Christ to achieve salvation. At the same time, a significant minority believe in salvation through faith in Christ alone.

The Atheist subgroup follows our expectations. A majority (> 55%) don’t believe in Jesus as savior because they do not believe in any God at all. When we add in “another answer not given,” about three quarters of the Atheists are covered.

Moving to Agnostics, we see that a strong majority selected either “no God” or “another answer not given.” Adding in “I

never gave it any thought,” we cover about three quarters of the Agnostics.

The Nothing in Particular group (NIPs) has a significantly different range of answers. About one in five say they do believe in salvation through faith in Christ. This number is significantly higher than Atheist and Agnostics, but it still leaves four out of five who say they do not believe. Almost one half of them selected “another answer not given” or “I never gave it any thought.”

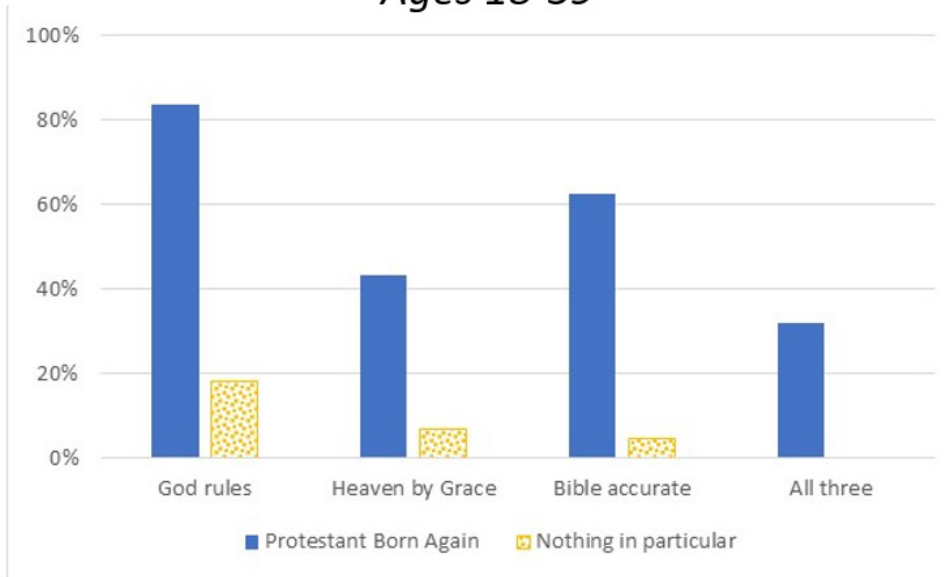
So, there are about one fifth of the NIPs who might have a somewhat Christian view of salvation. However, less than 3% of this group claim to be born-again. And of course, four fifths of this group say they do not believe in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So, an overwhelming majority of the NIPs clearly are not born-again or evangelical Christians.

NIPS and a Subset of a Biblical Worldview

How do those who claim their religion is “Nothing in particular” stand in accepting a subset of the Basic Biblical Worldview discussed in earlier articles? The subset consists of the following three questions:

1. Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God: **God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today**[{3}](#)
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all its teachings: **Strongly Agree**
3. If a person is generally good enough or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven: **Disagree Strongly**

*Figure 3 Biblical Worldview Comparison
Ages 18-39*



Let's compare the results for Born-again Protestants and those who claimed to be Nothing in Particular. As shown in Figure 3, for each of the questions those agreeing with a

biblical worldview among the Nothing in Particulars is a small fraction of those among Born-again Protestants. When we combine the three questions together, we see one out of three Born-again Protestants vs. no NIPs. Certainly, some of these NIPs came from an evangelical background, but none of them interviewed in our survey ascribe to a basic evangelical worldview as adults. As noted in our first report, one in three born-again Protestants is a disappointing percentage ascribing to these biblical worldview questions, but it is certainly dramatically better than the Nothing in Particular group.

NIPs and Biblical Sexual Morality

On another front, we compare views on biblical sexual morality held by Born-again Protestants and Nothing in Particulars. To do this, we will consider three of the questions from our survey as listed below.

1. Sex among unmarried people is always a mistake: from **Agree Strongly** to Disagree Strongly
2. Viewing explicit sexual material in a movie, on the internet, or some other source is:

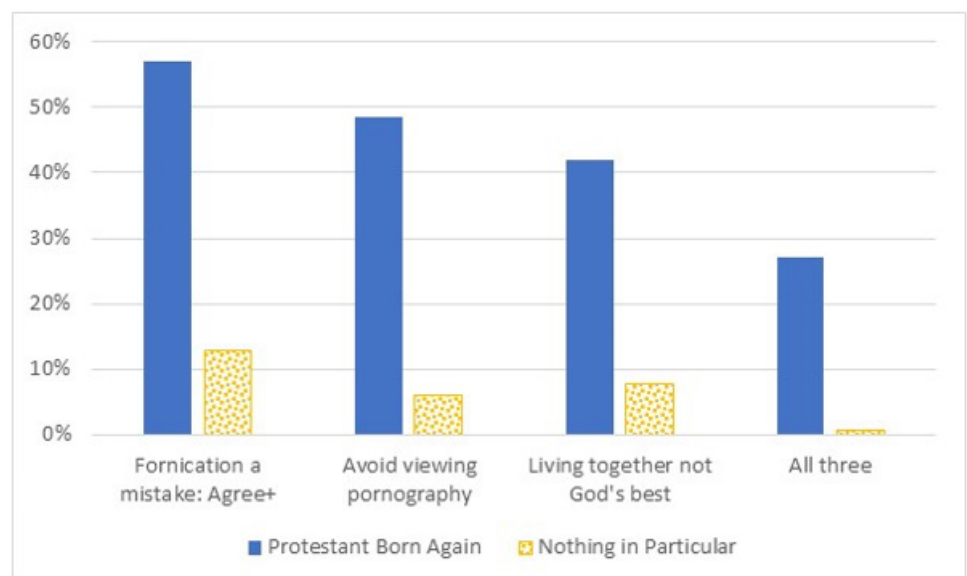
- **a. To be avoided**
 - b. Acceptable if no one is physically or emotionally harmed in them.
 - c. A matter of personal choice
 - d. Not a problem if you enjoy it
 - e. Don't know
3. Living with someone in a sexual relationship before marriage:
- a. Might be helpful but should be entered into with caution.
 - b. Just makes sense in today's cultural environment.
 - c. Will have a negative effect on the relationship.
 - **d. Should be avoided as not our best choice as instructed by God.**

For this comparison, we are looking for the following answers:

1. Either Agree Strongly or Agree Somewhat
2. To be avoided
3. Should be avoided as not our best choice as instructed by God

The results from our survey are shown in Figure 4. Once again, we see a large difference between these two groups. Clearly, the NIPs do not ascribe to a biblical view

*Figure 4 Comparison of Sexual Morality
Ages 18 - 39*



on sexual morality. The majority of Born-again Protestants do not ascribe to those beliefs either, but a significant minority of them do.

Summary

As discussed above, we find that the Nothing in Particular group have

- less than one in five who say they are trusting in Christ for their salvation,
- none who accept a simple three question take on a biblical worldview and
- almost none who accept a biblical view on sexuality.

In each of the age groups considered in our surveys, the percentage of respondents selecting a NIP affiliation has grown as the age groups have grown older. There is no indication that any significant number of them are returning to or turning to an Evangelical Christian perspective.

Clearly for the upcoming decade a critical question for the Evangelical church is, How do we reach the Unaffiliated and especially the Nones with the good news of the gospel? Since the vast majority of NIPs do not accept the authority of the Bible, we need to be prepared to share with them why we can believe the Bible is an accurate communication from the Creator of this universe. In particular, that the biblical account of the death resurrection of Jesus is an accurate historical account. One source to use in this task is our article "[The Answer is the Resurrection](#)"^{4} which can be found on the Probe website.

Notes

1. [Introducing Probe's New Survey: Religious Views and Practices 2020](#)
2. As we dive down into these subgroups remember that the smaller number of respondents of each type reduce the accuracy

as we apply our limited sample to the entire group across the United States. In this case, we surveyed 68 LDS, 178 Other Religions not LDS, 124 Atheist, 167 Agnostic, and 245 Nothing in particular (between 18 and 39 years old).

3. Other answers to select from: God created but is no longer involved with the world today; God refers to the total realization of personal human potential; there are many gods, each with their different power and authority; God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach; there is no such thing as God; and don't know.

4. [The Answer Is the Resurrection: Sharing Your Faith in Christ \(probe.org\)](https://probe.org)

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Body and Soul in the Old Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?

The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You are your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of "dust from the ground." But he doesn't become "a living creature" until God takes the second step of breathing "the breath of life" into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add "the breath of life" for Adam to become a living human being.

Here's another observation. Notice that Adam doesn't suddenly spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.[\[1\]](#) Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether "the breath of life" in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

Surviving the Death of the Body

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob's wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin.^{2} We read that "as her soul was departing (for she died)," she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, "as her soul was departing"? In Hebrew, the word here translated "soul" is the term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, "The term *nephesh* . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14)."^{3}

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah 5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: "the life [that is, *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood." Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the "soul"—the immaterial component of a human being in which one's personal identity is located.^{4}

So when we read that Rachel's "soul was departing," does this simply mean that she was dying, that the "principle of life" (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her "soul," an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel's body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades.[\[5\]](#) In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his "soul" from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, "There is virtual consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol."[\[6\]](#) What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of "ease," where "the wicked cease from troubling" and "the weary are at rest" (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it's also described as a place of "darkness" and "the land of forgetfulness" (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: "There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, "Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive."[\[7\]](#)

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to

call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord’s prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as “an old man . . . wrapped in a robe” (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery “in a nonliteral way to describe immaterial, invisible realities.”[\[8\]](#) Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even “beyond the grave.” As John Cooper notes, “Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death.”[\[9\]](#)

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person’s life ends in death (vv. 5-12).

But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless

confidently proclaims: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me" (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was "envious of the arrogant" and "wicked" (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is "destruction," his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God "there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him."[\[10\]](#) This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we're going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no "religious importance" whatever.[\[11\]](#) What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the "good news" that friendship with Him can continue beyond death.[\[12\]](#) Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it's even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the "dust of the earth," shall be "awakened" and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised "to everlasting life," but others to "everlasting contempt." Cooper writes, "This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal destinies."[\[13\]](#) The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, "Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19)."[\[14\]](#)

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place

called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

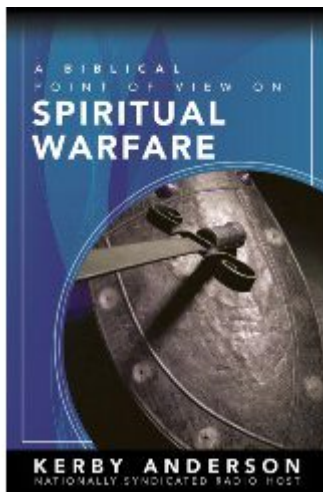
But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.
2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.
3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.
4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.
5. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 810.
6. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 783.
7. Moreland, *The Soul*, 51.
8. Moreland, *The Soul*, 52.
9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.
10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 109; cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 912.
11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.
12. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 36-43.
13. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 916.
14. Moreland, *The Soul*, 53.

Satan

What does the Bible say about Satan, and what do Christians believe about him? Not only is this an important biblical doctrine, but it has also been used to determine if someone has a biblical worldview. Kerby Anderson explains the basics about Satan, how he catches us in his snares, how to resist his temptations.



The Barna Group has found that a very small percentage of born again Christians have a biblical worldview. They define a “biblical worldview” as having the following six elements: “The Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.”[\[1\]](#)

Various surveys (including the Barna surveys) show that many Christians think that belief in Satan is optional. After all, they argue, if I believe in Jesus that is enough. But if you

believe that Jesus was God then you have to believe that Satan exists. Satan is mentioned in the Gospels twenty-nine times. And in twenty-five of those references, Jesus is the one talking about Satan.



It is also worth noting that Satan is mentioned many other times in the Bible. Satan is referred to in seven Old Testament books and every New Testament writer talks about Satan. Belief in Satan is not optional.

When Satan is discussed in the New Testament, he is identified by three titles. These three titles describe his power on earth and his influence in the world:

1. *Ruler of the world* – Jesus refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). This means that he can use the elements of society, culture, and government to achieve his evil ends in this world. That doesn’t mean that every aspect of society or culture is evil. And it doesn’t mean that Satan has complete control of every politician or governmental bureaucrat. But it does mean that Satan can use and manipulate the world’s system.

2. *God of this world* – Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this world” who “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan sets himself up as a false god to many. His power over religion and the ability to promote false religions keeps people from know the true gospel.

3. *Prince of the air* – Paul reminds Christians that they were dead in their trespasses and since in which they “formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air.” Satan is the prince of the

air and thus controls the thoughts of those in the world system. The Bible says: "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). So we should not be surprised that we find ourselves in the midst of spiritual warfare.

How Did Satan Fall?

The Bible doesn't say much about Satan and his fall. There are two passages in Scripture that many believe does describe Satan's fall but not all theologians are convinced. These passages are Ezekiel 28:11-19 and Isaiah 14:12-19.

Ezekiel predicts the coming judgment of the Gentile nations and refers to "the prince (or leader) of Tyre" and then later to "the king of Tyre." These do not seem to be the same person. The first is obviously the earthly leader of the city Tyre. Ezekiel is predicting his ultimate downfall and the destruction of his kingdom.

The person referred to as the "king of Tyre" seems to be a different person. He has "the seal of perfection" and was "blameless." He is described as "full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." It also says that he was "in Eden, the garden of God."

It appears that the "king of Tyre" describes Satan who was serving God as an angel. The passage further says that Satan was "lifted up" because of his beauty which many commentators suggest mean that he was the greatest of all of God's creations. But he sinned. This passage says "you sinned" and "you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor."

Another passage that appears to be talking about Satan is where the prophet Isaiah is predicting that God will bring judgment against Babylon. The first part of chapter 14 (verses 1-11) is directed at the king of Babylon. But many theologians and commentators believe that the subject changes in the next section (verses 12-19) because it focuses on the "star of the

morning.”

It worth mentioning that the “star of the morning” in verse 12 could just as easily be translated “the shining one.” That connects with Paul’s statement that Satan is an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). The passage also says that he has “fallen from heaven.” It seems like we are not talking about the Babylonian king but actually talking about Satan.

If this passage is talking about Satan, then it tells us more about his motivations that led to his fall. Five times in this passage we see the phrase “I will.” He is prideful and wants to achieve a position “above the stars of God” (Isaiah 14:13). He also sought to be “like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). And he wanted to “sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north” (Isaiah 14:13). Each of these desires tells us more about his motivations.

From this passage we discover three things about Satan. First, Satan wanted to be superior to creation. Second, Satan wanted to be superior to the Creator. Third, Satan wanted a superior place to rule all of creation.[\[2\]](#)

What Do We Know About Satan’s Character?

The Bible tells us a great deal about Satan through the various names that are given to him. Let’s begin by looking at the name “Satan.” In Hebrew the name means “adversary.” He is opposed to God and His plans. And Satan is also opposed to God’s plan in our lives. If we are to be successful in spiritual warfare, we must understand that he is our adversary. This characteristic of Satan is significant. The Old Testament uses this name for him eighteen times, and it is used thirty-four times in the New Testament.

Another common name for Satan is “the devil.” This name in the Greek is *diabolos* and is derived from the verb meaning “to throw.” The Devil throws accusations and lies at us. This is a

significant part of spiritual warfare. He accuses believers while he slanders and defames the name of God. This name occurs thirty-six times in the New Testament.

There is one passage in the New Testament that uses both of these names for Satan. Peter warns believers about Satan who is an “adversary” and “the devil” who is on the prowl like roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). He is a formidable adversary that believing Christians should not take lightly.

Satan is also known as the “tempter.” He tempts us to follow him and his evil ways rather than follow God’s plan for our lives. When he appears to Jesus in the wilderness, he is referred to as the tempter (Matthew 4:3). Also, Paul refers to Satan as “the tempter” (1 Thessalonians 3:5) and thus illustrates one of the key characteristics of Satan: he tempts humans to sin.

A related name is “serpent.” Satan took the form of a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Paul talks about Satan tempting Eve due to his subtle tempting and craftiness (2 Corinthians 11:3).

In addition to tempting believers, Satan is referred to as the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10).

Satan is also called “the evil one” both by Jesus (John 17:15) and John (1 John 5:18-19). Satan can control the world system, but believers are given the power to resist his temptations and evil designs. Satan is the source of much of the evil in the world, and that is why believers must reckon with his impact and content with spiritual warfare.

We also see his power in the names that describe his dominion. He is described as “the god of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. He is also called “the prince of the world” (John 14:30) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). And he is known as “the ruler of the demons” in Matthew 12:24.

How Are We Caught in the Snares of Satan?

The Bible teaches that Satan can capture our minds and divert us from God's purpose. This is called a snare. In certain biblical passages (for example, Psalm 124), we read about fowling and the use of snares. They would capture birds by spreading a net on the ground that was attached to a trap or snare. When the birds landed to eat the seeds spread out, the trap would spring and throw the net over the birds.

A snare could be anything Satan uses that entangles us or impedes our progress. It could be a roadblock or it could be a diversion. A wise and discerning Christian should be alert for these snares that can prevent our effectiveness and even ruin our testimony.

The character of Satan gives us some insight into his methods and techniques. James gives us a perspective on this by telling us that when we are tempted we should not blame God. Instead we should understand the nature of temptation and enticement. "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15).

James shows that temptation toward sin is usually a process rather than a single act. We are tempted and then carried away and enticed by our own lust. Like a fisherman who tries to catch a fish using bait, Satan tries to entice us by placing before us something that will cause us to be carried away. Then when lust has conceived, we do it again, and eventually experience death.

Satan is not only the tempter, but he is a subtle deceiver "who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). Jesus warned that there will be "false Christs and false prophets" who will "show great signs and wonders." They will be so convincing that they "shall deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24).

Paul teaches that Satan disguises himself as an “angel of light” and his demons transform themselves as “ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Satan’s main strategy is to lie. Jesus said concerning Satan, “When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). Paul prays that Christians would “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Ephesians 4:14).

How Did Jesus Resist the Temptations of Satan?

How can we resist Satan’s temptations? We can learn some valuable lessons about how to deal with spiritual warfare by watching how Jesus was able to resist the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4) in the forty-day Temptation. The Bible records three attempts by Satan to get Jesus to act independently of His Father’s will for Him.

1. *Challenged God’s provision* – Satan first challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matthew 4:3). The Bible tells us that Jesus was very hungry after fasting for forty days. While Jesus had the power to do so, He resisted because it was His Father’s will that he fast in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

Instead Jesus quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 8:3 back to Satan. “But He answered and said, ‘It is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

2. *Challenged God’s protection* – Satan next took Jesus into “the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple” (Matthew 4:5). He then commanded Jesus to throw Himself down in order for the angels to protect Him. In other words, Satan wanted Jesus to take His protection into His own

hands and no longer trust in God's protection. Notice that Satan even quotes Scripture (Psalm 91) to Jesus (Matthew 4:6) in order to tempt Him.

Jesus, however, quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 6:16 back to Satan. "Jesus said to him, 'On the other hand, it is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:7).

3. *Challenged God's dominion* – Satan then took Jesus "to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matthew 4:8). And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:9). Satan would give Jesus rule and dominion over all that the world could provide if he were turn away from His mission to save mankind and worship Satan.

Notice that Jesus did not challenge Satan's claim that he had the kingdoms of the world to give to Him. After all, Satan is the "prince of this world" (John 12:31). But instead Jesus said to him, "Go Satan! For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only" (Matthew 4:10).

As believers we should remind ourselves that Satan is a defeated foe. Jesus tells us that "the ruler of this world has been judged" (John 16:11). But his influence is still felt. Jesus also refers to Satan as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). John tells us that "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). And Peter reminds us that "the Devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The good news is that "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Notes

1. "Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years," March 2009, www.barna.org.
2. You can find more information about Satan, demons, angels, and spiritual warfare in my book [A Biblical Point of View on](#)

[*Spiritual Warfare*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009).

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See Also

[*Probe Answers Our Email: Angels and Demons*](#)