

# [A Christian Purpose for Life - Proclaiming the Glory of Christ](#)

*Steve Cable answers the question, Why does God leave Christians on earth after we are saved?*

## **Misconceptions and Our Identity**

Examining the beliefs and behavior of born-again emerging adults over the last few years, one common deficiency is a misunderstanding of their relationship to eternity. Many believers either have not thought about the question of “Why did God leave me here on earth once I was saved?” or they harbor misconceptions about the answer. Let’s begin by considering some common misconceptions.



The first misconception is being purposeless. These people believe that thinking about their eternal purpose is a waste of time. Just live for the moment. My eternal destiny is secure so why bother myself with asking, “Why am I still here? I’ll worry about the things of heaven after I die.” This viewpoint devalues the sacrifice of Christ. He did not give His life for us so that we can be unconcerned about what concerns Him.[{1}](#)

The second misconception is focusing on this life’s pleasures. Many young people say things like “I don’t want Jesus to return until after I have traveled, married, had children, gotten that promotion, etc.” They assume these things are of ultimate importance in their lives. Yet, the Bible teaches us that this attitude will choke out God’s fruit in our lives. As Jesus said, “[T]he worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, enter in and choke the word and it becomes unfruitful.”[{2}](#)

A third misconception is becoming prepared for heaven. Some think that God needs to get our character up to some entrance level requirement before we are ready to move on to heaven. Most people with this view are not really working hard to match their lifestyle to a biblical standard, but they figure at some point they will. However, since our righteousness is not our own, but rather that of Jesus’,[{3}](#) we don’t need to get more righteous to enter heaven. In fact, when we see Him then we will be like Him.[{4}](#) The fastest way to make us completely mature is to take us out of this world.

One final misconception is providing for one’s family. Caring for our family is certainly part of God’s desire for our lives. However, if our sole purpose is to provide for our own family and our children have the same purpose and so on, the church will be limited to us and our progeny—and no one else.

These common misconceptions as to our purpose fall under the warning Paul gave us in Philippians,

For many walk, of whom I often told you, . . . that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, . . . whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.[{5}](#)

Paul goes on to explain, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a

Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ . . .”{6}

We are to live our lives constantly aware of our heavenly citizenship, eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord. In this article, we examine the book of 1 Peter to see what Peter has to say about our purpose in life and how we are to live it out.

## **Called to a Critical Mission**

Peter begins the book of 1 Peter by reminding us what Christ has done for us. Let’s read the first few verses of this amazing letter.

According to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Through the resurrection of Jesus we are born again and are looking forward to an eternal inheritance kept in heaven for us to be revealed in the last time. What a wonderful truth helping us to realize that we are already living in eternity as we wait for our inheritance to be revealed. In the meantime, we are living on this earth in a temporary “earthsuit” called to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives.

In the remainder of his letter to the churches, Peter addresses what we are to do while we are living on this earth. He first tells us that we are likely to encounter trials and suffering in this world. Then, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 1, Peter conveys to us the importance of our mission, giving us instructions we would expect a military commander to give before sending his team out on a dangerous and critical mission. He tells us to:

*Prepare our minds for action* — we are to be action oriented, not passively waiting for our life to pass by.

*Be alert and focused on the mission* — we are to keep our minds focused on God’s purpose for our life on this earth.

*Keep a long term perspective* — don’t be deceived into putting your thoughts and your hope on the temporary temptations of the world, and

*Realize God has entrusted you with the priceless resource of time* — Peter tells us that we are to conduct ourselves in the fear of the Lord while we are on this earth.

In the latter parts of chapter 1, Peter reminds us that we have been redeemed at a very high cost, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. We owe a tremendous debt which motivates us to desire to faithfully carry out our mission on this earth.

The calls to action listed above must be accompanied by two critical components to be effective in this life. Specifically, Peter calls on us to purify our hearts not conforming to our former lusts and to love other believers not only as a friend, but also with sacrificial love by which Jesus loves you. The actions listed above are not our purpose on this earth, but rather activities we need to address if we are fulfill our purpose.

## **Our Purpose: To Proclaim His Excellencies**

Why does God leaves us on this earth after we are saved? In the second chapter of his letter, Peter

begins by reminding us that we are living stones, part of the holy building God is building on the cornerstone Jesus Christ. This building made up of the lives of Christians is to be a beacon proclaiming the glory of God and the good news of redemption in Jesus.

In verses 9 and 10 of Chapter 2, Paul clearly states the purpose of our lives and of the church when he writes:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are a special people on this earth, God's own people. Peter uses the terms used by Yahweh of the Israelites in the wilderness where God told them through Moses,

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.[{7}](#)

The Israelites discovered that they could not obey His voice or keep His covenant even when ruled by kings who desired to serve the Lord. Jesus Christ had to "become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him."[{8}](#) In Jesus' righteousness, we now become the special people of God given His purposes to accomplish on this earth.

We are left here so that we may proclaim His excellencies. We are to proclaim more than just the general attributes of our Creator. We are to let people know that our Creator is prepared to deliver them out of darkness and let them live in His marvelous light. God has entrusted us with His glory, His light. We have the privilege of proclaiming His glory and offering His grace. At a basic level, we proclaim His excellencies by obeying His commands to proclaim Christ, make disciples, and be available for God to use us on this earth.

If we are to proclaim the glories of Christ and the gospel of redemption to eternal life, how are we to accomplish this wonderful goal?

## **Fulfilling Our Purpose Through Excellent Behavior and Right Relationships**

In this article we have been looking at the question, "What purpose does God have for my life as a Christian here on planet Earth?" We have seen that God leaves us here primarily for the purpose of bringing others into His kingdom. As Paul said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . if I am to remain on in the flesh it will mean fruitful labor for me."[{9}](#) In his letter to the Colossians, Paul stated, "We proclaim [Christ] by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ."[{10}](#) The apostle Peter put it this way, "[You are] a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."[{11}](#)

If we are to proclaim Christ in this world, the next obvious question is, how are we to do this? Is the best approach to rent a large electronic bull horn and drive the streets preaching the good news? Or in today's world perhaps we can start a Facebook page or send out a tweet with John 3:16? These techniques may be appropriate in some circumstances, but that is not where the apostle Peter says we should begin.

Peter follows his statement that we are called to proclaim Christ with this interesting instruction:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. [{12}](#)

Instead of following this primary purpose with instructions on how to best verbalize our faith, he first focuses on how we live out our faith. He clearly points out that our behavior if kept excellent in purity and good deeds will attract the attention of non-Christians, of evil doers, causing them to consider the work of Christ in this world. We see that the reason God calls us to excellent behavior is not so that we will be good enough to get into His heaven, but rather to convict others of their need for a savior.

Peter continues to address ways in which we should proclaim Christ in the remainder of the second chapter. He points out that having godly relationships is an important way of proclaiming Christ. What types of relationships does Peter address? He specifically calls out our relationships with unbelievers, government authorities, our bosses, our co-workers, husbands and wives, other believers and the elders He has placed over us.

Relationships are the biggest part of life. As people observe your relationships, they can see that they are different because you offer supernatural love, and your eternal perspective allows you to approach them with a servant's heart. As Christians, our relationships are not about getting what we deserve, but rather about giving to others the same way Jesus has given to us.

## **Fulfilling Your Purpose Through Your Testimony and Your Prayers**

Above we have seen that our post-salvation purpose of life on earth is to proclaim the excellencies of Jesus Christ through the gospel. We also looked at the first two ways that we should use to proclaim Christ in this world. The first way is through excellent behavior lived out before an unbelieving world. The second is through living out right relationships with those with whom we deal in this world. As you can see, these first two ways that Peter addresses do not require us to explain our faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, they draw unbeliever's attention to our lives, building up questions in their minds.

For example, in 1 Peter 2:18-19, Peter tells us,

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

Having a good attitude toward our boss even in those times when they are unreasonable finds favor with God and testifies to others of our different perspective.

After dealing with a comprehensive list of life relationships, from the government to our husbands and wives, Peter brings up our spoken testimony as well. In 3:15, he says:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, 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.

Not only are we to live our lives in ways that proclaim the glories of our Savior, we are to be prepared to give an account for the hope that is in us. We know from the first chapter of 1 Peter that

the hope that is in us is the hope that comes from being born again and knowing that we have obtained an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. We need to be prepared to share with others that through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ they too can share in this same hope that drives our lives. The phrase in the verse, to make a defense, is a translation of the Greek word *apologia* from which we obtain our English word “apologetics.”

It is important to note the context in which this call to apologetics is placed. First, it is to be done with gentleness and reverence, not with arrogance and self-righteousness. The object is not to demonstrate you are right, but rather to help the questioner come to grips with the truth of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Second, Peter reiterates his instruction found in 2:12, reminding us that we are to focus on living sanctified lives so that even those who slander us know in their hearts of our good behavior in Christ.

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:7, we are called to be “of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.” If we are to be effective in proclaiming Christ in this world we must be consistently praying about the people and the obstacles we face.

Peter makes it clear that our purpose as a church on this earth is to proclaim the goodness of Christ who delivered us out of the domain of darkness and into the eternal kingdom of God. Proclaiming Christ in this way involves our excellent behavior, our right relationships, our gentle defense of the gospel, and a commitment to prayer. Let us examine our lives to see how this call is being lived out in us.

## **Notes**

1. 2 Cor 5:14 and 1 Peter 1:13-17
2. Mark 4:19
3. Phil 3:9-10, 2 Cor 5:21
4. 1 John 3:3
5. Phil 3:18-19
6. Phil 3:20-21
7. Exodus 19:5-6
8. 2 Cor 5:20
9. Phil 1:21-23
10. Colossians 1:28 NET Bible
11. 1 Peter 2:9b NET Bible
12. 1 Peter 2:11-12

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# Addressing Anxiety in Tumultuous Times

*Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.*

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.[{1}](#) While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.



Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.[{2}](#) A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.[{3}](#) *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*

Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”[{4}](#)

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it's happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*”[{5}](#) The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, *we significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we'll explore this transformation.

## **Morphing Your Mind—It's Mostly Up to You!**

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we

can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.” {6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.” {7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.” {8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape. {9} This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design for renewing the mind.” {10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

## **Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude**

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire. {11} “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.” {12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.” {13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God. {14} As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you

may not come into temptation.” {15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what’s going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, “The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting.” {16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The “fight or flight” area actually shrinks in size. {17} It’s a real chill pill!

God keeps “him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.” {18}

## **Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart**

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It’s a God-given right to pursue it, according to America’s founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—“steal, kill, and destroy” {19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, “You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety*. There really is hope.” {20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we’re not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].” {21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God’s help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” {22}

Moreland jokes, “If we’re not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn’t need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it’s] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.” {23} As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That’s joy far beyond happiness!



## Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.” [{24}](#)

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if...”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.” [{25}](#)

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows: [{26}](#)

**Step 1: Relabeling:** call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.” [{27}](#)

**Step 2: Reframing:** take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

**Step 3: Refocusing:** Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

**Step 4: Revaluating:** After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.<sup>{28}</sup> Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.<sup>{29}</sup>

## Notes

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2. Nick Givas, Fox News, “Prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spike amid coronavirus outbreak, new report finds,” posted April 18, 2020.  
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3. Amy Hollyfield, “Suicides on the rise amid stay-at-home order, Bay Area medical professionals say,” posted May 21, 2020, [abc7news.com/suicide-covid-19-coronavirus-rates-during-pandemic-death-by/6201962](http://abc7news.com/suicide-covid-19-coronavirus-rates-during-pandemic-death-by/6201962).
4. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking and Health*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, p. 19 (emphasis mine).
5. Ibid.
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7. Leaf, 64.
8. Proverbs 23:7.
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10. Leaf, 65.
11. As with Buddhist meditation practices seeking utter emptiness.
12. Jennifer Wolkin, Mindful.org, “How the Brain Changes When You Meditate,” posted September 20, 2015, [www.mindful.org/how-the-brain-changes-when-you-meditate](http://www.mindful.org/how-the-brain-changes-when-you-meditate).
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14. Leaf, 82.
15. Matthew 26:41.
16. Ibid. Wolkin
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[www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X).
18. Isaiah 26:3.
19. John 10:10.
20. *Finding Quiet*, 54-55 (emphasis mine).
21. Ephesians 2:12, Amplified Bible.
22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.
29. Philippians 4:8.

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## [Is Jesus the Only Way? - Part 2](#)

*Paul Rutherford explains how reason, Christ's resurrection, and the Bible all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.*

I can't drive around town seven days straight without passing at least one car with a bumper sticker that reads, "Coexist" on the back. You know the one. It spells the word using symbols associated with the world's faiths, ancient and modern.



The popularly held mantra is that "all religions are equally valid ways to heaven." This is what's called pluralism. So is there room in this brave new world for the words of an ancient and historically respected faith?

Jesus once said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) That sounds offensive and inflammatory today. I will remind you that Jesus said it, not me.

Even more important is the truth question. It is perhaps even more offensive! Are Jesus' words true?

I fully acknowledge even the question itself may strike you as antiquated, out of date. Perhaps I sound to you like an eccentric, soured-up, fuddy-duddy. I may be. But if the words of Jesus are true, then far more than your offended sense of style is at stake here. Far, far more.

So listen up. And take note because this crazy sounding first-century Jewish rabbi made some crazy-big statements about the nature of man, the nature of reality, and how to live the good life, here, now, and forever. Does that at least sound appealing to you? If even just for the sake of a little controversy?

Explore with me the words of this rabbi. In this article we'll think through three reasons you should agree with him. And maybe you'll even find eternal life in the process. If you're a long-time listener to Probe radio, or a regular listener, this may sound familiar. I have [another](#) program exploring the position that Jesus is the only way to God. This one is part two. In this one I give you three reasons Jesus is in fact the only way to heaven. In the previous program, I defended Jesus' statement against three lines of criticism. So in the next sections I'll explain how reason, the resurrection, and the Word all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

### **Jesus the Only Way Because of Reason**

Western culture today is more pluralistic and secular than ever before. This means at least in one small part, that people believe multiple religions lead to heaven. Western culture has been moving this way for some decades. Now it has reached mainstream. Pop culture increasingly accepts this. It is therefore so much more important to consider this exclusive claim Jesus made. He said, "I am the

way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” (John 14:6)

This is an increasingly unpopular teaching. Before I defend it, allow me to clarify. It was made by the Lord Jesus himself. I didn’t make it up. I am merely defending it.

So today I want to talk about how it is reasonable to believe this statement—why it is that you should yourself believe Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Today’s reason is logic itself. I will base this conclusion on two points: first, that the belief in one God is more logically defensible than believing in multiple creator gods; and second, that the belief in Jesus Christ as God is more reasonable than claims to deity made by others.

The first point is that believing in one creator God is more reasonable than believing in multiple. The god Aristotle believed in (the unmoved mover) was eternally simple. That is, at the root of all things is ultimately one thing—one cause, one source, one origin to which all other things owe their existence.<sup>{1}</sup> This position beautifully avoids the difficulty of what philosophers call *reductio ad absurdum*—or the problem of infinite regression—or the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg? The search for the first, original, or ultimate source, does not continue on and on forever. It cannot.

The second point is that Jesus is the most reasonable candidate for divinity. I respect the Buddha. But he never claimed to be God. Neither did Mohammad. Jesus was very clear. He claimed to be God.

Consider His teachings. They have not been surpassed in excellence in the two millennia that have passed since He walked the earth. Consider His actions. History’s best biographies about the man Jesus, record Him loving His enemies, healing the sick, and showing compassion to outcasts. Jesus’ life exemplified extraordinary moral rectitude.

I conclude, therefore, that it is more reasonable to believe Jesus is the only way to God given that it is more reasonable to believe in only one creator God, and given that Jesus has the best case for divinity among man’s founders of faith.

## **Jesus the Only Way Because of the Resurrection**

We have a saying in American culture that nothing is certain but death and taxes. So if the taxman doesn’t come to call, the grim reaper will eventually. Death finds each of us, so we must face our own mortality.

By the best historical accounts Jesus also died and was buried, just like so many of His human brothers before Him.<sup>{2}</sup> But Jesus, on the other hand, experienced something unique, declaring Him God above all others.

I speak, of course, of resurrection.<sup>{3}</sup> Jesus Christ is the only person ever to have raised up Himself from the dead of his own volition, and by His own power.

This one point may be the most compelling of the three I offer this week. It is perhaps the most intuitive case for Jesus being the only way to Heaven. If Jesus really died and raised Himself from the dead, then His power exceeds those of any other man before Him, or after, for that matter. Surely He must be God.

No other religious figure can make that claim. In a class by Himself, Jesus reigns over all the founders of world religions. Muhammad’s burial site is a common tourist destination in Saudi Arabia

for contemporary pilgrims. Buddha's cremation site is in northern India. No such site exists today in contemporary Israel for Jesus. His body has no confirmed remains.

The tomb is empty. That much is clear. Records indicate He definitely died and was buried. The empty tomb demands an explanation. Resurrection makes the most sense. Jesus is the only way because He is the only one who has died and raised himself up to new life.

We have several excellent articles at our website devoted to just this topic. [\[4\]](#) Go check them out for more detail. Jesus is who He said he is, "The way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) So the question is, do you want some? Believe in Jesus today by faith.

## **Jesus the Only Way Because the Word Declares It**

Western culture today increasingly accepts the belief that multiple religions are equally valid and they are all ways to eternal life. I propose to you today another reason to believe something diametrically opposed to this—namely that the Jesus Christ revealed in the Bible, is the only way to eternal life. As the gospel writer John quoted Him, He is, the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). No one comes to the Father except through Him.

This third and final line of reasoning that Jesus is the only way to eternal life, springs from the Bible—from the very word of God itself.

You may not accept the Bible as God's word. That's ok. Just hear me out. Let me explain how this line of reasoning at least makes sense. Then after you've heard it, you can judge for yourself if it's true or not.

So first, the Bible claims to be God's word (2 Timothy 3:16). If we therefore assume the very commonly held conception that God is good and perfect, then that includes the words He speaks as well. So if He speaks good words, then those words must be true. They must accurately describe reality.

The Bible also makes this claim. Jesus in a famous prayer to the Father asks him to sanctify His disciples with the truth before stating, "Your word is truth." (John 17:17) It's a profound statement.

So if God's word is true, and God says in His word that Jesus is, in fact, the only way to God—that none can come to Him except by Jesus, then that means it's true. See how simple that is?

But this statement is also made in another part of the Bible, Acts 4:12. Peter and John have been arrested and are being examined by the Jewish leaders. Peter declares Jesus to them and explains, "There is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which we must be saved."

I fully admit this line of reasoning rests on you acknowledging the authority of the Bible—in which case you may not have needed to be convinced in the first place. But if you had not already been convinced of the truth of God's word, I am very sincerely relying on the power of the Spirit at work in you to believe this truth. (Isaiah 55:11)

## **Conclusion**

In this article we considered the truth of a controversial claim. It might be one of the most hotly contested claims in religion today—that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

This is not popular these days in America, Europe, anywhere in the English speaking West, or the non-English speaking West. To hear responses to criticisms against the claim, check out [part one](#) of

this two part series.

Jesus was Himself no stranger to controversy. He died a criminal's death at the hands of His enemies. He was killed and buried. The Jewish and Roman leaders were smugly satisfied they'd dispatched this unquiet voice.

But when Jesus' enemies attempt to end his earthly ministry, they unknowingly ushered in a spiritually unending ministry of atonement and reconciliation. By his death Jesus paid the price of sin—death—satisfying the just wrath of God. Jesus made peace with God on your behalf. Believe in Him by faith today and you can have peace with God. Would you like to have peace with him? Tell Him right now. Use your voice or pray silently. But tell Him. Go ahead.

The only thing required of you to receive eternal life is to believe Jesus is Lord. One of Jesus' most famous sayings is, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Confess this belief with your mouth that Jesus Christ is God and believe in your heart that God has raised up his Son from the dead. And you can be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Jesus is the only way to God because there is no other way to get to God but by Jesus. Mankind is imperfect. You are dead in your transgressions and sins. The only way to satisfy God's holy wrath is to give Him what is due: death. Jesus died that death for you. He's the only one who could ever have paid your debt. And He did.

Human reason leads us to this beautiful conclusion that Jesus is the only way. God has declared it himself clearly in his divinely inspired book—the Bible. His resurrection seals it.

If you believed this for the first time today you are now heir to an eternal throne. Pick up a Bible and read Jesus' life story in the book of John. Tell a friend who's a Christian. Make plans to join them at their church Sunday. Keep praying and reading the Bible. You can discover the wonderful adventure of life in Jesus Christ, the only way to God.

## Notes

1. Metaphysics, Lambda.
2. Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19
3. Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20
4. [Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? — A Clear Christian Perspective: What Difference Does the Resurrection Make?; The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? — A Real Historical Event; The Answer Is the Resurrection](#)

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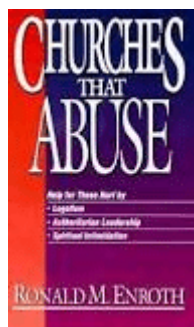
# Abusive Churches

What characterizes abusive churches is their cultic method of ministry. Although outwardly orthodox in their theology, these churches use abusive and mind control methods to get their followers to submit to the organization. In this article Dr. Pat Zukeran covers eight characteristics of abusive churches.

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



We are all familiar with traditional cults such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are, however, other groups with cultic characteristics that do not fit the same profile as the traditional cults. Sometimes called "abusive churches" or even "Bible-based cults," they appear outwardly orthodox in their doctrinal beliefs. What distinguishes these groups or churches from genuine orthodox Christianity is their abusive, cultic-like methodology and philosophy of ministry.



In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth carefully examines several of these churches throughout the United States. He reveals the cultic methods these groups use and points out several distinguishing marks of abusive churches. At this point I will briefly introduce each of these characteristics and some of my own. Later, I'll discuss all these characteristics in detail.

First, abusive churches have a control-oriented style of leadership. Second, the leaders of such churches often use manipulation to gain complete submission from their members. Third, there is a rigid, legalistic lifestyle involving numerous requirements and minute details for daily life. Fourth, these churches tend to change their names often, especially once they are exposed by the media. Fifth, denouncing other churches is common because they see themselves as superior to all other churches. Sixth, these churches have a persecution complex and view themselves as being persecuted by the world, the media, and other Christian churches. Seventh, abusive churches specifically target young adults between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. The eighth and final mark of abusive churches is the great difficulty members have in getting out of or leaving these churches, a process often marked by social, psychological, or emotional pain.

Those involved in a church that seems to reflect these characteristics would be wise to evaluate the situation thoroughly and leave the church if it is appropriate. Staying may increase the risks of damaging your family relationships and multiplies the likelihood of losing your perspective.

Members of such churches often develop a distorted view of reality, distrust everyone, and suffer from stress, fear, and depression. Some former members even continue to experience these things after escaping from an abusing church. There are also several documented cases in which associating with an abusive church has led to the deaths of individuals or their relatives.

Some of these groups have networks of many sister churches. In some cases these groups have split off from more mainstream denominations. Occasionally the new groups have even been denounced by the founding denomination. Such groups often disguise themselves by frequently changing the name of their organization, especially following adverse publicity. This practice makes the true nature of these organizations more difficult to determine for the unsuspecting individual. Some abusive churches have college ministries all across the country. On some university campuses such student movements are among the largest groups on their respective campuses.

It is important that Christians today know the Bible and know how to recognize such churches so as not to fall into their traps. In order to help people become more aware of churches which may be abusing their members, I now want to go through in more detail the eight characteristics I mentioned earlier.

## **Control-Oriented Leadership**

A central feature of an abusive church is control-oriented leadership. The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self-confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God. Because of such claims, the leader's position and beliefs cannot be questioned; his statements are final. To members of this type of church or group, questioning the leader is the equivalent of questioning God. Although the leader may not come out and state this fact, this attitude is clearly seen by the treatment of those who dare to question or challenge the leader. The leader of the movement often makes personal decisions for his followers. Individual thinking is prohibited; thus the followers become dependent on the leader.

In the hierarchy of such a church, the leader is, or tends to be, accountable to no one. Even if there is an elder board, it is usually made up of men who are loyal to, and will never disagree with, the leader. This style of leadership is not one endorsed in the Bible. According to Scripture all believers have equal access to God and are equal before Him because we are made in His image, and we are all under the authority of the Word of God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 believers are directed to measure all teachings against the Word of God. Acts 17:11 states that even the apostle Paul was under the authority of the Bible, and the Bereans were commended because they tested Paul's teachings with the Scriptures. Leaders and laity alike are to live according to Scripture.

## **Manipulation of Members**

Abusive churches are characterized by the manipulation of their members. Manipulation is the use of external forces to get others to do what someone else wants them to do. Here manipulation is used to get people to submit to the leadership of the church. The tactics of manipulation include the use of guilt, peer pressure, intimidation, and threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience. Often harsh discipline is carried out publicly to promote ridicule and humiliation.

Another tactic is the "shepherding" philosophy. As practiced in many abusive churches this philosophy requires every member to be personally accountable to another more experienced person. To this person, one must reveal all personal thoughts, feelings, and discuss future decisions. This personal information, is not used to *help* the member, but to *control* the member.



Another means of control is isolation. Abusive churches may cut off contact between a new member and his family, friends, and anyone else not associated with the church.

How different this style of leadership is from the leadership of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lovingly, gently, humbly, and sacrificially leads His sheep.

## **Rigid, Legalistic Lifestyle**

The third characteristic of abusive churches is the rigid, legalistic lifestyle of their members. This rigidity is a natural result of the leadership style. Abusive churches require unwavering devotion to the church from their followers. Allegiance to the church has priority over allegiance to God, family, or anything else.

Often members are required or pressured to attend Bible studies five, six, or seven days a week. There is a requirement to do evangelism; a certain quota of contacts must be met, and some churches even require members to fill out time cards recording how many hours they spent in evangelism, etc. Daily schedules are made for the person; thus he is endlessly doing the church's ministry. Former members of one church told me they were working for their church from 5:00 am to 12:00 midnight five days a week.

Members of such churches frequently drop out of school, quit working, or even neglect their families to do the work required by the church. There are also guidelines for dress, dating, finances, and so on. Such details are held to be of major importance in these churches.

In churches like these, people begin to lose their personal identity and start acting like programmed robots. Many times, the pressure and demands of the church will cause a member to have a nervous breakdown or fall into severe depression. As I reflect on these characteristics I think of Jesus' words concerning the Pharisees who "tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger" (Matt. 23: 4). What a contrast from the leadership style of Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. . . .For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

## **Frequent Changing of Group/Church Name**

A fourth characteristic of abusive churches is a pattern of constantly changing the name of the church or campus ministry. Often a name change is a response to unfavorable publicity by the media. Some abusive churches have changed their name several times in the course of a few years.

If you are in such a church, one that has changed its name several times because of bad publicity, or if you feel unceasing pressure to live up to its demands, it is probably time to carefully evaluate the ministry of the church and your participation in it.

## **Denouncing All Other Churches**

Let us now take a look at the fifth characteristic: abusive churches usually denounce all other Christian churches. They see themselves as spiritually elite. They feel that they alone have the truth and all other churches are corrupt. Therefore, they do not associate with other Christian churches. They often refer to themselves as some special group such as, "God's Green Berets," "The faithful remnant," or "God's end-time army." There is a sense of pride in abusive churches because members feel they have a special relationship with God and His movement in the world. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth quotes a former member of one such group who states, "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the

world like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch.” However the Bible makes it clear, that there are no spiritually elite groups or churches. Ephesians 4:36 states, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all.”

The Christian church universal is united by the same God, the same Holy Spirit, and the fundamental beliefs of the Bible which include such things as the Trinity, authority of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, and so on. In these central truths we stand united. A church which believes itself to be elite and does not associate with other Christian churches is not motivated by the spirit of God but by divisive pride.

## **Persecution Complex**

The sixth characteristic follows naturally. Because abusive churches see themselves as elite, they expect persecution in the world and even feed on it. Criticism and exposure by the media are seen as proof that they are the true church being persecuted by Satan. However, the persecution received by abusive churches is different from the persecution received by Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus and the Apostles were persecuted for preaching the truth. Abusive churches bring on much of their negative press because of their own actions. Yet, any criticism received, no matter what the source—whether Christian or secular—is always viewed as an attack from Satan, even if the criticisms are based on the Bible. This makes it difficult to witness to a person in such a church for he will see your attempt to share the gospel with him as persecution. Often in cases like these, when I am accused of persecuting, I simply reply, “I am here talking to you with the Word of God which you say you believe. How can this be persecution?” This approach often helps in continuing the dialogue with a member of an abusive church who has been brainwashed to believe that all opposition is persecution.

## **Targeting Young Adults**

The seventh characteristic of abusive churches is that they tend to target young adults ages 18-25 who are in the middle class, well educated, idealistic, and often immature Christians. Young adults are the perfect age group to focus on because they are often looking for a cause to give their lives to, and they need love, affirmation, and acceptance. Often these churches will provide this, and the leaders frequently take the role of surrogate parents.

## **Painful Exit Process**

The eighth characteristic is a painful and difficult exit process. Members in many such churches are afraid to leave because of intimidation, pressure, and threats of divine judgment. Sometimes members who exit are harassed and pursued by church leaders. The majority of the time, former members are publicly ridiculed and humiliated before the church, and members are told not to associate in any way with any former members. This practice is called shunning.

Many who leave abusive churches because of the intimidation and brainwashing, actually feel they have left God Himself. None of their former associates will fellowship with them, and they feel isolated, abused, and fearful of the world. One former member of a particular campus ministry said, “If you leave without the leadership’s approval, condemnation and guilt are heaped upon you. My pastor told me he thought it was satanic for me to leave and wondered if I could continue my salvation experience.”

Let me conclude this discussion by sharing some practical ways of reaching those who are involved in abusive churches. First, we must begin with prayer. Witnessing to those brainwashed in abusive churches is often intimidating and difficult. Often leaders will not allow an individual member to meet with an outsider unless accompanied by an older, more experienced person who is trained in debating and/or intimidation. Therefore, we must pray (1) for a chance to speak with the individual<sup>{1}</sup> and that he would be open to what we have to share.<sup>{2}</sup>

Second, lovingly confront the person and surface some biblical issues. Often, abusive churches have a bizarre teaching or a theological error that can be pointed out. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth documents several examples of this. For instance, the leader of one church had strange teachings based on his claims of extra-biblical revelations from God.<sup>{3}</sup> These included dietary laws, sexual behavior, home decorations, and others. The leader of another group called doctors “medical deities.” He also claimed medicines had demonic names and if taken, opened a person up to demonic influence.<sup>{4}</sup> Pointing out errors, inconsistencies, and bizarre beliefs may open the individual’s mind and prompt him to begin asking questions.

Third, share articles you may find in the newspaper or in magazines on the particular church under discussion. The book that I have often quoted from, *Churches That Abuse*, is an excellent resource. The key is to get the individual to start asking questions and research answers for himself. Tell him to test everything with the Scriptures and not to be afraid to ask questions. If the leader is afraid or hesitant to answer a member’s honest questions, the maturity of that leadership may be suspect.

Jesus, however, said that truth is a means of freedom, not bondage. He said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

## Notes

1. Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 118.
2. Ibid., p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 128.
4. Ibid., p. 170.

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## [Money Management in a Crisis](#)

*The COVID pandemic has caused a worldwide financial crisis, making stewarding God’s money more important than ever. Kerby Anderson provides a biblical view of money, giving, debt, and savings.*

A number of years ago, I wrote a book with the appropriate title, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*.<sup>{1}</sup> Although there have been tough times in the past, we certainly need some biblical wisdom about our money and how to manage it in our current circumstances. Here are some key principles that I discuss in that book and in a more recent book on the subject of *Christians and*

## **Biblical View on Money**

Let's start by correcting a common cliché that money is the root of all evil. Actually, the biblical passage says: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness" (1 Timothy 6:10).

Money is not evil, but the love of money can be a concern. Money can be used to promote good or evil. Money can provide for your family, feed the poor, and promote the gospel. It can also be used to buy drugs, engage in prostitution, and destroy individuals and society.

The real question is: What is your attitude towards money? What do you plan to do with the financial resources God has placed into your hands? Jesus warned us that we should not love money because we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). In order to have a proper biblical perspective on money, we need to understand what the Bible teaches about wealth and poverty.

While we are talking about money, let's focus some attention on wealth. Within the Christian community, we are often bombarded with unbiblical views of wealth. At one extreme are those who preach a prosperity gospel of "health and wealth" for all believers. At the other extreme are radical Christians who condemn all wealth and imply that a rich Christian is a contradiction in terms.

What is a biblical view of wealth? First, wealth itself is not condemned. The Bible teaches that God gave material wealth to Abraham (Genesis 13), Isaac (Genesis 26), Jacob (Genesis 30), and Joseph (Genesis 39). Other characters in the Old Testament were also wealthy, such as Job (Job 42) and Solomon (1 Kings 3). In fact, we see in Job 42 that God once again blessed Job with material possessions after his trials. In Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, wealth is seen as evidence of God's blessing (Deuteronomy 8; 28; Proverbs 22:2; Ecclesiastes. 5:19).

Even though wealth might be an evidence of God's blessing, believers are not to trust in it. Passages in the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that the believer should not trust in wealth but in God (Proverbs 11:4; 11:28; Jeremiah 9:23; 1 Timothy 6:17; James 1:11; 5:2).

Second, when wealthy people in the Bible were condemned, they were condemned for the means by which their riches were obtained, not for the riches themselves. The Old Testament prophet Amos railed against the injustice of obtaining wealth through oppression or fraud (4:11; 5:11). Micah spoke out against the unjust scales and light weights with which Israel defrauded the poor (6:1). Neither Amos nor Micah condemned wealth per se; they only denounced the unjust means by which it is sometimes achieved.

Third, Christians should be concerned about the effect wealth can have on our lives. We read in many passages that wealth often tempts us to forget about God. Proverbs 30:8-9 says: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion, That I not be full and deny You and say, 'Who is the Lord?'" Hosea 13:6 says of those who were satisfied that "their heart became proud" and ultimately forget about the Lord.

## **Biblical View on Giving**

In order to develop a biblical point of view on money, we should first focus on the subject of giving. The concept of the tithe is introduced in the Old Testament. The word tithe means "a tenth part." Once you understand that someone who, say, makes \$3000 a month and gives only \$100 a month is

not tithing. A number of studies have found that only 2-3 percent of households tithe their income to their church.

There is no explicit command in the New Testament to tithe. The primary reason is that the tithe was for the Levites and the priests. The substitutionary death of Christ for our sins did away with the need for a temple and priests.

In the New Testament, we do see numerous verses calling for believers to give. For example, we are to give to those who minister (1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 2:10). We are to give to those who trust God to supply their needs (Philippians 4:19). We are to give as God has prospered them (1 Corinthians 16:2) and are to give cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7). And the Bible teaches that we will ultimately give account of our stewardship (Romans 14:12).

The first century believers set a high standard for giving. They sold their goods and gave money to any believer in need (Acts 2:45). They sold their property and gave the entire amount to the work of the apostles (Acts 4:36-5:2). And they also gave generously to the ministry of Paul (2 Corinthians 8:1-5) on a continual basis (Philippians 4:16-18).

Even though the tithe was no longer required, it appears that the early believers used the tithe as a base line for their giving. After all, a large majority of the first century believers were Jewish, and so they gave not only the tithe but above and beyond the requisite ten percent.

Paul makes it clear that Christians are not to give “grudgingly or under compulsion” but as each believer has “purposed in his heart” (2 Corinthians 9:7). Although the tithe was no longer the mandatory requirement, it seems to have provided a basis for voluntary giving by believers.

There is also a correlation between sowing and reaping. 2 Corinthians 9:6 says: “Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Elsewhere in Scripture, we read that the size of a harvest corresponds to what we scatter. Proverbs 11:24-25 says: “There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, And there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, And he who waters will himself be watered.” Notice that a spiritual harvest may be different from the kind of seed that is sown. For example, a material seed (giving to ministry) may reap a spiritual harvest (1 Corinthians 9:9).

Finally, we are to give according to what we have purposed in our hearts. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says: “Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

## **Biblical View on Debt - Part 1**

The Bible has a number of warnings concerning debt. Proverbs 22:7 says: “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a servant to the lender.” When you borrow money and put yourself in debt, you put yourself in a situation where the lender has significant influence over you.

Many other verses in the Proverbs also warn about the potential danger of taking on debt, especially another person’s debt (Proverbs 17:18; 22:26-27; 27:13). While this does not mean that we can never be in debt, it does warn us about its dangers.

If you are debt free you are free to follow the Lord’s leading in your life. If you are in debt, you are constrained and become a servant to the lender. People who are in financial bondage are not emotionally or spiritually free. Their financial obligations wear heavy upon their mind and spirit.

The Bible also teaches that it is wrong to borrow and not repay. Psalm 37:21 says: "The wicked borrows and does not pay back, but the righteous is gracious and gives."

Some have taught that Christians should never go into debt. The basis for that teaching is usually the passage in Romans 13:8 because it says: "Owe nothing to anyone."

Although some have argued that this verse prohibits debt, the passage needs to be seen in context. This passage is not a specific teaching about debt but rather a summary of our duty as Christians to governmental authority. Paul is teaching that we should not owe anything to anyone (honor, taxes, etc.). But he is not teaching that we should never incur debt. While it is better that we are debt-free, this passage is not commanding us to never go into debt.

The Bible is filled with biblical passages that provide guidelines to lending and borrowing. If debt was always wrong, then these passages would not exist. After all, why have passages providing guidelines for debt if debt is not permitted? Certainly there would be a clear prohibition against debt. We should point out that the clear implication of Romans 13:8 is that we should pay our debts and it would be wise if we would pay our debts off as quickly as possible.

## **Biblical View on Debt - Part 2**

One of the consequences of debt is that we can often deny reality. In order to realistically deal with the debt in our lives we need to get rid of some of the silly ideas running around in our heads.

For example, you are NOT going to win the lottery. Your debt problem is NOT going to go away if you just ignore it. And a computer glitch in your lender's computer is NOT going to accidentally wipe out your financial records so that you don't have to repay your debt.

Another consequence of debt is a loss of integrity. When we cannot pay, we start saying "the check's in the mail" when it isn't. We not only kid ourselves but we try to mislead others about the extent of our problem with debt.

Sometimes debt even leads to dishonesty. Psalm 37:21 says: "The wicked borrows and does not pay back." We should repay our debts.

A third consequence of debt is addiction. Debt is addictive. Once in debt we begin to get comfortable with cars, consumer goods, furniture, etc. all funded through debt. Once we reach that comfort level, we go into further debt.

A final consequence of debt is stress. Stress experts have calculated the impact of various stress factors on our lives. Some of the greatest are death of a spouse and divorce. But it is amazing how many other stress factors are financially related (change in financial state, mortgage over \$100,000). When we owe more than we can pay, we worry and feel a heavy load of stress that wouldn't exist if we lived debt free.

## **Biblical View on Savings**



It is always important for us to get out of debt. I have written another booklet on the subject of debt. If you are in debt or want to learn more about government debt and personal debt, I encourage you to obtain that booklet. Email me your name and address at [kerby@probe.org](mailto:kerby@probe.org) and I will send it to you.

We should not merely work to get out of debt and eventually break even. Savings and investing should be part of your budget and part of your life plan. Saving and investing are ultimately a means to an end. You may be saving for your kids' college or saving for your retirement.

America used to be a nation of savers. In fact, thrift was a foundational element of American society. The architect Louis Sullivan even carved the word THRIFT over the door of his bank. Thrift was seen as a private moral virtue that made public prosperity possible. Americans supported institutions that encouraged savings.

The Bible encourages us to save. In Proverbs it encourages those who do not save to consider how a lowly creature like the ant prepares for the future. "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest" (Proverbs 6:6-8).

The writer of Proverbs also talks about how wise people save in contrast to foolish people who do not. "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has" (Proverbs 21:20).

We should always have a budget. Author and speaker, John Maxwell, has a great definition of a budget: "A budget is people telling their money what to do instead of wondering where it went." A budget is a plan for saving and spending.

The book of Proverbs admonishes us to plan. Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit your works to the LORD And your plans will be established." But as we develop these plans for the future, we also need to be sensitive to the Lord's leading. "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

The Bible promises that good things will happen when we plan. "Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity" (Proverbs 21:5, NLT). By contrast, the Bible also teaches that your plans will fail if these plans are not within the will of God. Isaiah 30:1 says, "'Destruction is certain for my rebellious children,' says the Lord. 'You make plans that are contrary to my will. You weave a web of plans that are not from my Spirit, thus piling up your sins.'"

If you do not have anything in savings, you need to begin by putting aside a cash reserve for emergencies. Proverbs 22:5 says, “The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.” Everyone needs a cash reserve for major emergencies (fire, tornado, earthquake) and even for small emergencies and inconveniences (broken appliance, car repair, flat tire).

Most financial advisors suggest that you have six months’ worth of income set aside for an emergency or unexpected expense. You may not have that set aside right now, but today is a good time to start setting aside some money. Make your first goal to set aside one month’s worth of income.

This has been a brief overview of money management. I encourage you to read books<sup>{3}</sup> and visit websites that will give you even more direction on how to use your money. The Bible provides insight in giving, savings, and debt. Apply these principles and allow God to bless you.

### Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times* \*Eugene, OR: Harvest House), 2009.

2. Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Economics* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House), 2016).

3. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possession and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House), 2003.

Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Economics* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House), 2016.

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## [Digging Our Own Grave: The Secular Captivity of the Church](#)

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

### Our Real Enemy

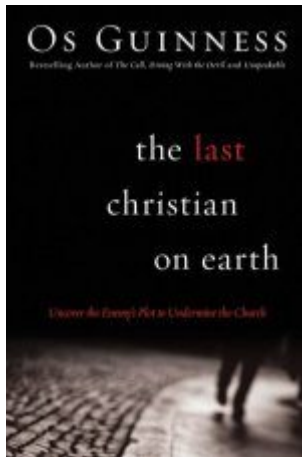


If memory serves me correctly, it was my introduction to such concepts as secularization and pluralization. I’m speaking of the book *The Gravedigger Files* written by Os Guinness in the early 1980s. The subtitle of *The Gravedigger Files* is *Papers on the Subversion of the*



*Modern Church*. The book is a fictional dialogue between two members of a council which has as its purpose the undermining of the Christian church. The Deputy Director of the Central Security Council gives one of his subordinates advice on how to accomplish their goal in his area.

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



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

The primary focus of Probe Ministries now is what's been called the cultural captivity of the church. All too many of us are influenced more by our culture than by the Bible. It's impossible to separate oneself from one's surrounding culture, to be sure, but when there is conflict, we are called to follow Christ. Cultural captivity is subtle. It slowly creeps up on us, and, before we know it, it has soaked into our pores and infected much of what we think and do. "Subversion works best when the process is slow and subtle," Guinness's Deputy Director says. "Subtle compromise is always better than sudden captivity." [\[2\]](#)

This book is helpful for seeing ourselves in a clearer light, and for understanding why some of the things we do, which seem so harmless, are really very harmful to our own Christian lives and to the church.

## Stages of Subversion

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

This process of undermining comes in various stages. Three of them are demoralization, subversion, and defection. [\[3\]](#)

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

*Subversion* comes about from winning over key church leaders who begin to trumpet "radical" and

“daring” ideas (better words for this, Guinness says, may be “revisionist” and “unfaithful” {4}).

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

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

Moving through these stages, the Deputy Director says, has led the church deeper and deeper into cultural captivity. The church becomes so identified with the culture that it no longer can act independently of it. Then it finds itself living with the consequences of its choices. Says the Deputy Director, “Our supreme prize at this level is the complete devastation of the Church by getting the Adversary [or God] to judge her himself. “Here, in a stroke,” he continues, “is the beauty of subversion through worldliness and its infinite superiority to persecution. . . . if the Adversary is to judge his own people, who are we to complain?” {5}

## **Forces of Modernism**

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

*Secularization* is the process of separating religious ideas and institutions from the public sphere. Guinness’s Deputy Director speaks of society being “freed” from religious influence. {6} This is how secularists see the separation. Religion is seen as restrictive and oppressive and harmful, and the public square needs to be free of it. All ideas and beliefs are welcome as long as they aren’t explicitly grounded in religious belief. Because of the influence of the public arena in our lives, Guinness points out that “*Secularization ensures that ordinary reality is not just the official reality but also the only reality.* Beyond what modern people can see, touch, taste and smell is quite simply nothing that matters.” {7}

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

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

## Some Characteristics of Subversion

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

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

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

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

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

## A Wrong Way to Respond

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

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

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

When they recognize the loss of purity and principles in their actions, they begin to pull back and disentangle themselves from the centers of power. There is a return to the authority of the gospel without, however, a sense of the *power* of the gospel. Standing on the outside, as it were, they resort

to “theologies stressing prophetic detachment, not constructive involvement.”<sup>{17}</sup> This is the phase of “hypercritical separatism.”

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

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

## Notes

1. Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2010), 11.
2. Ibid., 51, 52.
3. Ibid., 28.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 32-34.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Ibid., 72.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid., 97.
11. Ibid., 159.
12. Ibid., 138.
13. Ibid., 155.
14. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday, 1973,), 449; quoted in Guinness, *Last Christian*, 79.
15. Guinness, *Last Christian*, 166.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Ibid.

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## [Faith Trends in America: How Is Christianity Faring as We Enter the Third Decade of the 21st Century](#)

*In looking at the state of American Christianity, Steve Cable examines how handling data inaccurately can produce wildly varying conclusions.*



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

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

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

1. What do you mean by Christianity? Are you referring to all potential Christians both Protestant and Catholic or are you focused on a subset, such as Evangelicals? And,
2. Is anything beyond affiliation with a church necessary to be considered an active Christian? Examples might include a biblical understanding of how one gets to heaven and belief in the Bible.

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

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

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

## **Evangelicals: Thriving or Declining**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **What’s Happening with the Nones**

Nones are people who state their religious affiliation is either atheist, agnostic or nothing at all.<sup>{4}</sup> The dramatic growth of the Nones has been an ongoing headline story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Are the Nons THE Major Growth Story?**

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

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

1. The percentage growth of the “nons” is *not many times larger*. From 2007 to 2014, “nons” grew their percentage of the population by 44%. But, Nones grew by almost the same rate at 42%. Looking at absolute growth, the “nons” grew by four million people versus the Nones’ 19 million—almost five times the number of “nons.” The growth of the “nons” is relegated to a minor factor when compared to the Nones.
2. The “nons” are a subset of the Evangelicals. And Stanton states, “*Evangelicals* have benefited more from these ecclesiastical exoduses than anyone else. They even . . . *outpaced the nones.*”<sup>{10}</sup> In fact, most of the “nons” growth came as a result of switching between evangelical denominations. Thus, any growth by the “nons” is offset by declines in other evangelical groups, resulting in an overall *decline of about 1%*. Evangelicals have not even come close to outpacing the Nones.

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

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

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

## Confusing Expansion with Same-Store Growth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Notes

1. Glenn Stanton, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Franklin TN: Worthy Publishing), 2019.
2. Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, October 17, 2019.
3. General Social Surveys from 1988, 1998, 2018.
4. Terms used in the Pew Research Surveys; the GSS survey uses None to capture all of those responses and other surveys use variations of these approaches.
5. Ibid.
6. Stanton, p. 54.
7. General Social Surveys, 1972-2018: Cumulative Codebook, March 2019.



8. Dave Kinnaman and Dave Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why It Matters*, Baker Books, 2007, p. 22.
9. Stanton, p. 30-31.
10. Stanton, p. 28.
11. Stanton, p. 31.
12. Young Life Annual Reports 2009 and 2017;  
[https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/2017\\_Annual%20Report.pdf](https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/2017_Annual%20Report.pdf)  
<https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/AR2009final.pdf>
13. InterVarsity Annual Reports 2007 and 2017;  
<https://intervarsity.org/news/bringing-new-life-every-corner-every-campus;>  
<https://intervarsity.org/news/2006-2007-annual-report;>  
<https://intervarsity.org/about-us/2016-2017-annual-report>
14. The years looked at were 2009 and 2017.
15. For InterVarsity, we looked at 2007 and 2017.

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## [God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally](#)

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

### **Creating God Space**



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

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

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

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

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

## **Spiritual Conversation-Killers**

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

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

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

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

## **Wondering Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations**

In *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally*, Doug has four great chapters on

*noticing, serving, listening, and wondering* your way into spiritual conversations. For our purposes, let's direct our attention to that final chapter, which involves "wondering" our way into spiritual conversations. "Of all the things you'll read in this book," Doug tells us, "this chapter holds the most promise if you truly want to see the quality and quantity of your spiritual conversations increase."[{8}](#)

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

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

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

## **Bringing the Bible Into Your Conversations**

Let's now discuss Doug's advice about bringing the Bible into our conversations.[{15}](#)

The word of God is powerful. Paul describes it as "the sword of the Spirit."[{16}](#) And the author of Hebrews tells us it can "judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."[{17}](#) Indeed, it's partly because the Bible is so powerful, that we need to be careful about the way in which we bring it into our conversations.

As Doug reminds us, "If people sense you're trying to use the Bible as an authoritative 'crowbar' to beat them into submitting to your viewpoint, your conversation is likely over. However, if you humbly ask for permission to introduce the Scriptures into your dialogue, 'deep spiritual magic' begins to happen."[{18}](#) The key point here, of course, is *asking for permission*. This is important and Doug encourages us to always make a habit of it.[{19}](#) After all, if the person has given you permission to share something from the Bible, then they won't feel awkward or threatened when you do so. And if they *haven't* given you permission, then it's probably better just to wait and pray for a more opportune time.

Okay, that sounds good. But how can we know when it's right to ask for permission? Here we need a measure of wisdom and even plain common sense. In general, however, when the person expresses an *interest* in some issue about which the Bible speaks, it might be a good time to ask for *permission* to share what the Bible says. Doug gives the example of talking with some non-

Christian college students about the meaning of love.<sup>{20}</sup> The students were intensely interested in this topic, but they were having a hard time defining what the word even meant. After discussing the issue for a bit, Doug asked for permission to share what the Bible has to say about love. Having gotten their permission, he directed them to the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13. Primed and ready, the students eagerly listened to what the Bible had to say. Its message had suddenly become relevant to them, for it spoke directly to an issue about which they cared deeply.

If we could learn how to introduce the Bible like *that*, our non-Christian friends might be more eager to hear what it says. In the next section we'll conclude our discussion of Doug's book by considering "missed opportunities" and "burned bridges."<sup>{21}</sup>

## Missed Opportunities and Burned Bridges

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

Let's first consider missed opportunities. Suppose you had a conversation with a neighbor who made a comment that left a wide-open door for spiritual conversation—and you said . . . nothing. We've probably all had conversations like this. Maybe the comment caught us off guard, and we just weren't sure how to respond. Or maybe we felt too tired, or scared, or something else. Whatever the reason, we can "reclaim" such missed opportunities. It's often not even that hard. Doug tells of missing out on a great opportunity because he just wasn't sure what to say. About a month later, however, he got another opportunity. He told the person that he'd been thinking a lot about a comment which they had previously made. Intrigued, the person asked what it was—and almost immediately they were right back where they had left off a month earlier!<sup>{22}</sup>

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

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

## Notes

1. Doug Pollock, *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009), 11-12.
2. For more on Doug, check out his website: [www.godsgps.com/](http://www.godsgps.com/)
3. Pollock, *God Space*, 16.
4. The citations in this paragraph can be found in Pollock, *God Space*, 20-21.
5. This is "Killer 1" in Doug's view. See Pollock, *God Space*, 24.
6. *Ibid.*, 25.
7. In what follows, I briefly mention several of the spiritual conversation-killers which Doug discusses on pp. 29-32. Specifically, Doug mentions conversation "killers" like disrespect, control,

judgment and combativeness.

8. Pollock, *God Space*, 65.

9. See Doug's chapter, "Listening Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations," in Pollock, *God Space*, 53-64.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

11. All of the quoted material in this paragraph comes from a section on "Good Wondering Questions" in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.

12. See the examples under this section heading in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.

13. *Ibid.*, 73.

14. This is one way in which Doug likes to refer to non-Christians. See Pollock, *God Space*, 16.

15. See Pollock's chapter 9, "Bringing the Bible into your Conversations," in *God Space*, 87-99.

16. Ephesians 6:17.

17. Hebrews 4:12 (NASB).

18. Pollock, *God Space*, 95.

19. *Ibid.*, 93.

20. See the discussion in Pollock, *God Space*, 90-94.

21. Doug discusses this topic in chapter 10, "Reclaiming Missed Opportunities and Rebuilding Burned Bridges," 100-106.

22. Doug shares this story on pp. 101-103.

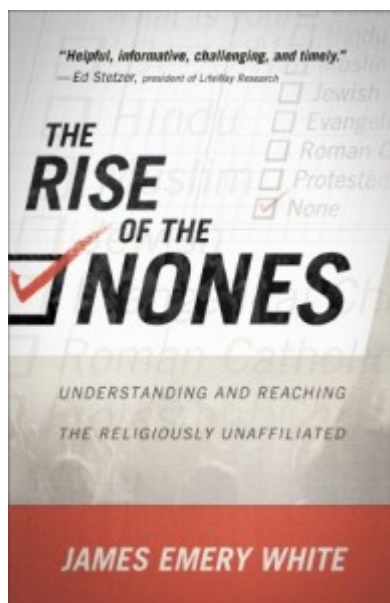
23. The citations in this paragraph come from Doug's discussion on p. 106.

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## [The Rise of the Nones - Reaching the Lost in Today's America](#)

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



Probe Ministries is committed to updating you on the status of Christianity in America. In this article, we consider James White's book, *The Rise of the Nones*,

*Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated.* {1} His book addresses a critical topic since the fastest-growing religious group of our time is those who check “none” or “none of the above” on religious survey questions.



Let’s begin by reviewing some observations about Christianity in America.

From the 1930’s {2} into the early 1990’s the percentage of *nones* in America {3} was less than 8%. But by 2012, the number had grown to 20% of all adults and appears to be increasing. Even more alarming, among those between the ages of 18 and 30 the percentage grew by a factor of three, from 11% in 1990 to nearly 32% in 2012.

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

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

One report concludes, “The challenge to Christianity . . . does not come from other religions, but from a rejection of all forms of organized religions. They’re not thinking about religion and rejecting it; they are not thinking about it at all.” {4} In fact, the 2011 Baylor survey found that 44% of Americans said they spend no time seeking “eternal wisdom,” and a Lifeway survey found that nearly half of Americans said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

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

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

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

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

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

## Living in a Post-Christian America

A 2013 Barna study<sup>{5}</sup> shows America rapidly moving into a post-Christian status. Their survey-based study came to this conclusion: over 48% of young adults are post-Christian, and “The influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s youngest Americans.”<sup>{6}</sup>

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

### Secularization

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

### Privatization

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

### Pluralization

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

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

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

## If You Build It, They Won’t Come

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

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

As James White notes, “The very people who say they want unchurched people to . . . find Jesus resist the most basic . . . issues related to building a relationship with someone apart from Christ, . . . and inviting them to an open, winsome, and compelling front door so they can come and see.” {13}

Paul had to change his approach when addressing Greeks in Athens. In the same way, we need to understand how to speak to the culture we want to penetrate.

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

Today, we face a different dynamic among the *nones*. “The goal is not simply knowing how to articulate the means of coming to Christ; it is learning how to facilitate and enable the person to progress from [little knowledge of Christ], to where he or she is able to even consider accepting Christ.” {14}

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

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

We need to be aware of how these can be used to offer the good news in a way that can penetrate through the cultural fog. White puts it this way, “Even if it takes a while to get to talking about Christ, (our church members) get there. And they do it with integrity and . . . credibility. . . Later I’ve seen those *nones* enfolded into our community and before long . . . the waters of baptism.” {15}

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

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

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

We need to take to heart the three primary tasks of any missionary to an unfamiliar culture. First, learn how to communicate with the people we are trying to reach. Second, become sensitized to the new culture to operate effectively within it. Third, “translate the gospel into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.” {16}

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



The gospel of John tells us, "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." {17} Jesus brought the free gift of grace grounded in eternal truth. As we translate the gospel in today's cultural context for the *nones*, this combination needs to shine through our message. What does it look like to balance grace and truth?

- If we are communicating no grace and no truth, we are following the example of Hinduism.
- If we are high on grace - but lacking in truth, we give license to virtually any lifestyle and perspective, affirming today's new definition of tolerance.
- On the other hand, "truth without grace: this is the worst of legalism . . . - what many *nones* believe to be the hallmark of the Christian faith." The real representative of dogma without grace is Islam." In a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity, they said that as Muslims, they could never be certain of their forgiveness and salvation as Christians can.
- Grace is the distinctive message of Christianity but never remove it from the truth of the high cost Christ paid. Jesus challenged the religious thought of the day with the truth of God's standard. Recognizing we cannot achieve that standard, we are run to the grace of God by faith.

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

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

## **Opening the Front Door to *Nones***

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

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

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

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

One way we have a chance to interact with *nones* is when they expose their children to a church experience. Children's ministry is not something to occupy our children while we have church, but is

instead a key part of our outreach to the lost *nones* in our community. “What you do with their children could be a deal breaker.”

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

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

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

## Notes

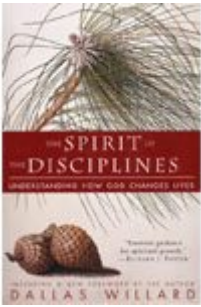
1. James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*, Baker Books, 2014.
2. Katherine Bindley, “Religion Among Americans Hits Low Point, As More People Say They Have No Religious Affiliation: Report,” *Huffington Post*, March 1, 2012.
3. General Social Survey conducted over multiple years by the National Opinion Research Center and accessed through the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com).
4. ARIS, “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population”, Trinity College, [commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES\\_08.pdf](http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf).
5. Barna Group, *How Post-Christian is America?*, 2013, [barna.org/barna-update/culture/608-hpca](http://barna.org/barna-update/culture/608-hpca).
6. *Ibid.*
7. White p. 46.
8. White p. 47.
9. *Ibid*, p. 121.
10. *Ibid* p. 109.
11. Stephen Cable, *Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults*, 2012, p. 60.
12. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1985.
13. White, p. 83.
14. White, p. 93.
15. White, p. 108.
16. White, p. 114.
17. John 1:15.
18. White, p. 155.
19. White, p. 169.
20. White, p. 152.
21. White, p. 163.
22. White, p. 180.
23. White, p. 181.

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# [Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World](#)

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

## **Spirituality and the Body**



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



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.”<sup>{6}</sup> 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.”<sup>{7}</sup> 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.”<sup>{8}</sup> 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 . . .”<sup>{9}</sup> 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.”<sup>{10}</sup> 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.”<sup>{11}</sup>

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.”<sup>{12}</sup> 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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