

Spiritual Life and the Kingdom of God

Tom Davis explores how recovering the practice of classic spiritual disciplines can enhance believers' relationship with God and our impact on the world around us.

There is a loss of spiritual knowledge of the truth of Christianity and how we live in light of that truth. This loss of spiritual knowledge is the result of shifts in cultural attitudes toward faith, happiness, ethics, freedom, and tolerance. The answer to the loss of spiritual knowledge is a return to the practice of spiritual disciplines. After examining the benefits of suffering and the disciplines of study, prayer, and fasting, I will show how these disciplines restore spiritual knowledge in society.

Loss of Spirituality

Today's society is in spiritual turmoil. Most people are not knowledgeable about spiritual things. The National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that the Church has become less influential in the lives of people. The effects of modernity and post modernity have created a popular culture that is suspicious of any claim to objective religious knowledge and any idea of an authoritative source of information concerning spiritual issues. Christian Smith writes, "In this culture religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it has enjoyed in previous eras of history."[\[1\]](#)

Basically, this means that most people have adopted a mindset that says, "You can't know anything for sure about religion. And if you think you do, you're an arrogant bigot."

Five Steps to Spiritual Death

In his book, *Kingdom Triangle*, Biola professor and theologian J.P. Moreland claims that there are five cultural shifts that have contributed to today's state of spirituality in the culture. The first shift separates knowledge from faith.^{2} All spiritual beliefs are considered valid because they are not real knowledge. Many people think that all religions lead to the same God. They say that we should not criticize other religions because they call God by a different name or hold different theological beliefs. These things are a matter of faith, not knowledge. This kind of attitude relegates all things spiritual to the subjective arena of faith. The things of the spirit are relegated to the "upper story" of faith. Real knowledge only exists in the "lower story" of the academic disciplines.^{3} The result of this view of faith is that spirituality becomes something that is neither true nor false. Separating faith and knowledge ultimately leads to a denial of spiritual truth.

The second shift is the definition of happiness.^{4} In the Bible happiness is portrayed as part of a right relationship with God. To live the good life meant that a person had intellectual and moral virtue. God created people to live well according to what they were created to be. J.P. Moreland explains, "So understood, happiness involves suffering, endurance, and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person."^{5} The pressure of modernism and postmodernism has changed this view. Happiness is now associated with pleasure. Television commercials promise to deliver happiness through the next fad diet that will increase your sex appeal. Male enhancement drugs promise to give men happiness by giving them back their youth and an increased sex drive. Happiness can be achieved by buying the newest car, toy, accessory, or a trip to an exotic place or amusement park. The good life now means having fun and collecting things so that you can feel good.

The third shift that Moreland notes is a shift from duty and virtue in morality to a minimalist view of ethics.[{6}](#) Previously, moral knowledge was viewed as an objective set of propositions about right or wrong, or good and evil. It used to be that everyone would agree it was always wrong to torture and kill small children. Now moral knowledge is viewed as subjective feelings or opinions. This change can be seen if we look at the language we use when making moral statements. People used to say things like, "I know," or "I think that this is the right thing to do." Now we say, "I felt that it was right for me to do this."

Duty to one's society used to be viewed as an essential part of a moral life. People were expected to help their neighbor. If an old lady was trying to cross the street, young men were expected to help her. Now, as long as they do not push the old lady into traffic, or rob her, the young men are considered to be moral. This change is the result of culture. People are no longer expected to contribute to their society. As long as people are not hurting anyone else, they are now considered to be moral. This view of morality changes a person's view of life. Life is now about having the most fun without harming anyone. Life used to be about living for something bigger than the individual. People used to live for God and country. Now people live for themselves and their own pleasure.

The fourth shift is in how people view freedom.[{7}](#) Freedom used to mean that people could live the way they ought to live. People were free to do what was right without government interference. Now freedom means the right of people to do what they want, when they want. Popular culture says that as long as you do not hurt anyone you can do what you want.

The last shift that Moreland notes is a shift in the meaning of tolerance.[{8}](#) Classic tolerance is when people will allow others to be, do, or believe differently than they do, even though one person thinks that the view of another person is wrong. People were allowed to critique the views of other

people, but respect for the other person was still maintained. Contemporary tolerance is the view that people are not allowed to critique another person's beliefs. People are no longer allowed to say that someone is wrong. This attitude ends all public discussion. Every idea must be tolerated, except ideas that claim that other ideas are wrong. Ironically, the new tolerance fails its own definition of tolerance because they do not tolerate intolerance.

Returning to Spiritual Health

The popular culture has raised five strongholds against the knowledge of God: separation of faith and knowledge, a self-centered view of happiness, a minimal view of ethics, a new view of freedom, and a new view of tolerance. How are Christians to respond to this? Paul writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Christians must recapture our spiritual disciplines.

Theology, the Intellect, and Spirituality

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that Christians need a renewed interest in theology. J. I. Packer, while discussing the influence of the Puritans in his life, writes, "All theology is also spirituality, in the sense that it has an influence, good or bad, positive or negative, on its recipient's relationship or lack of relationship to God."[{9}](#) Theology comes from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God; *logos* is the Greek word for logic. Theology can be understood as the logic, or science of God.[{10}](#) Spirituality, in the Christian context, is a person's relationship with God. In order to claim to have a relationship with God a person has to have knowledge of who God is. It would be odd to have a man talk about having a relationship with a woman and then say he does not know her and has never met her. The concept of a

relationship presupposes that each party in the relationship has knowledge of the other party.

The Bible and Books

An essential step to gaining spiritual knowledge is a disciplined approach to reading the Bible. Billy Graham addresses the importance of studying the Bible: “Your spiritual life needs food. What kind of food? Spiritual food. Where do you find this spiritual food? In the Bible, the Word of God.”[\[11\]](#) Paul writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God gave the Bible to people so that people can learn about God. By studying the Bible a person will gain knowledge about God and strengthen that person’s relationship with God.

Christians should also read other books. The Bible contains essential information for salvation and knowing God. However, the Bible is not exhaustive in its knowledge. Christians can grow intellectually and spiritually by gaining knowledge about God’s creation. David Naugle, head of the philosophy department at Dallas Baptist University, sums up the impact of books on his life: “I have sought and still seek to be a person of the Book and of books, that I might know God and more and more about his world in the context of faith.”[\[12\]](#) The study of the disciplines of theology, philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences helps people develop a coherent worldview. A worldview gives people the ability to understand the world through the corrective lens of the knowledge of God.

The medieval priest Thomas à Kempis advises, “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the saying of the ancients, for they

were not made without purpose.”[{13}](#) We grow intellectually and spiritually when we read the books of others. We gain insight to their wisdom. We should humbly read the books written by the ancient teachers. They left their wisdom in writing so that we can learn from them.

Suffering

Contemporary society thinks that suffering should be avoided at all costs. However, suffering can have a good outcome. Paul writes, “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). When we suffer, we can learn to endure. Our endurance produces character—that is, we mature and learn to trust God. God is the only hope that will never fail. Matthew Henry writes, “He who, being thus tried, comes forth as gold, will thereby be encouraged to hope.”[{14}](#) When soldiers train, they punish their body; they suffer. Their suffering in training makes them better soldiers in combat because their suffering has made them stronger and given them more endurance. As a Navy veteran, I know this is true personally.

Prayer

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of talking to God. God speaks to us in the Bible like the way people communicate through writing letters; the communication is one way. Praying is more like a discussion between two people. In prayer we get to talk with God.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The best way to start a disciplined prayer life is to pray every day. This is easier if we begin each day with prayer. J. P. Moreland writes, “When you get up in the morning, start off with praise and thanksgiving to God for the things you honestly appreciate about him and his dealings with you. Then lift your burdens to him until you have a sense of rest before the Lord.”[{15}](#) By beginning each

day with prayer we turn our minds and our hearts toward God and His will. Each day is a new opportunity to minister to someone in need. Our prayers will give us spiritual discernment so that we can recognize those in need. Our minds will also be turned towards God and the things of heaven, and we can continue to keep these things in our minds throughout the day.

John Calvin used four rules for prayer. First, we must “have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God.”[\[16\]](#) We must prepare ourselves to pray. Minds that are distracted do not make for good conversation. This is no ordinary conversation. People prepare themselves for meeting with important people. We should be prepared to open our hearts and minds to God when we pray. We should be aware that we are praying to our God, but that this God loves us and wants to bring our concerns to Him. Paul writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). We should not be anxious when praying because we know that God cares for us and can do all things. We should pray about all our concerns. Our prayers should be full of worship, thanking God for all that He has done.

One way to prepare to pray is to remember what David Naugle calls the “Three P’s.” These are “(1) my purpose, or what I would live my life for, (2) my profession, or what I would spend my life doing, and (3) my partner, or who I would spend my life with.”[\[17\]](#) David Naugle’s “Three P’s” cover the most important decisions we will make in our lives. Our purpose fills our life with purpose. We should pray for purpose so that God will align what we want our purpose in life to be with what He wants our purpose in life to be. Our profession is where we fulfill our purpose. A car mechanic can glorify God in fulfilling his purpose to be God’s representative in the auto shop. Our spouse is our ministry partner. Husbands

and wives are not separated from each other. They share each other's joys and burdens. Praying for these things will focus our minds on what is important and orient our hearts toward living a life pleasing to God.

John Calvin's second rule is "That in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, no, ardent desire of obtaining them." [\[18\]](#) Our requests should be things that we truly want or need. When we pray for the wants and needs of others, we should try to feel their desire for the request so that we can better minister to them through prayer. James tells us, "Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). We should be honest and sincere in our requests and in our thanksgiving. A sincere prayer would be praying for a loved one to get well when they are sick. An insincere prayer might look like praying for a job promotion when you know that you have not been putting your best effort into the job.

Third, "discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory." [\[19\]](#) When we pray, we should realize who we are, and who God is. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites' motivation to pray in the street corners was so that people would see them and think that these people were righteous. Jesus makes this point with more clarity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast,

saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:10-13)

The Pharisee came to God in prayer thinking that he was righteous and better than other men. He even pointed out his fasting and tithing as if God should be impressed with these things. The tax collector was humbled in the presence of God. He would not look up to heaven because he understood that he was guilty before God. The tax collector prayed sincerely for mercy. Asking God for mercy gives God glory and humbles the person.

John Calvin's fourth rule of prayer is, "We should be animated to pray with the sure hope of succeeding." [{20}](#) God is all powerful, able to meet our every need. Jesus teaches this same principle, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). By grace we have been made children of God. If we ask, God will give us what we need. When we humble ourselves before God, He will be merciful. God knows what we need and will give us what is good for us. Jesus said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11).

Through our prayer life we should conform to the image of God revealed in Jesus. Andrew Murry taught:

And of all the traits of a life *like Christ* there is none higher and more glorious than conformity to Him in the work that now engages Him without ceasing in the Father's presence His all-prevailing intercession. The more we abide in Him, and grow unto his likeness, will His priestly life work in us mightily, and our life become what His is, a life that ever pleads and prevails for men. [{21}](#)

Our prayers should make us more Christlike. By praying, we

conform to God's will. Christ makes intercessions to the Father for us. We have the privilege of making intercessions to Christ for others.

Fasting

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life."[{22}](#) One way to exercise self-control is by abstinence (saying no to ourselves by not doing something we want). Fasting is one of the most difficult abstaining disciplines. Calvin defines fasting as "when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or a certain period, and prescribe to ourselves a stricter and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food."[{23}](#) In short, fasting is abstaining from food for a short period of time.

Jesus taught:

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be done in secret. Again, Jesus points to the hypocrite, who wants to gain a reputation from his spiritual discipline. Jesus taught that people would be rewarded by not making a spectacle out of their spirituality.

What is the goal of fasting? Augustine taught, "While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live."[{24}](#) Fasting reminds Christians that they do not depend on temporal things. God wants Christians to rely on Him to supply our needs. In a world where tight schedules are kept and frivolous distractions are available

everywhere, it can be easy to forget God. Fasting emphasizes the importance of a right relationship with the world by abstaining from the sustenance of food. John Calvin lists three goals for fasting: “We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him.”[{25}](#) Many times the flesh (the part of us that operates independently from God, either in active rebellion or passive indifference) will want to rebel against the spirit. Fasting deprives the flesh of sustenance and weakens it. The spirit can then rule the flesh. There are times when a Christian will need to place special focus on prayer and meditation. Fasting is one way to prepare the spirit for these activities.

Reversing the Shifts

In our contemporary culture faith is viewed as being completely separate from knowledge. This faulty view originates within Christianity with the ideas of some Christian philosophers and theologians. Soren Kierkegaard saw faith as “the highest passion in a human being.”[{26}](#) He applies this view to Jesus: “The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ’s divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not ‘proofs,’ they have no intention of proving that all of this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.”[{27}](#) Kierkegaard believed that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead. But he thought that Jesus was unknowable through knowledge and reason. One could only know Jesus through faith, and that meant that faith was opposed to knowledge and reason.

When writing to Theophilus, Luke says, “Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, to write an

orderly account for you” (Luke 1:2-3). John writes “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you” (1 John 1:3). The New Testament authors were writing about what they knew. These men walked, talked, and ate with Christ for three years. These men knew Christ face to face. Wayne Grudem addresses the harmony of faith and reason: “Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts.”^{28} Faith is not separate from knowledge, it is trust in knowledge.

Once the facts of the Bible are known, faith in those facts will affect how we experience happiness. Happiness defined as satisfaction of desires is an empty pointless feel-good emotion that lasts only for a moment. But the joy of God does not fade. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Christians get joy through meditating on the things of God. Neal Anderson and Robert Saucy state that “Meditation on the Word should produce thoughts that reach our emotions.”^{29} A relationship with God produces happiness, a deep well-being of the soul, that lasts. The Psalmist writes, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight” (Psalm 19:14). What we study and put into our minds affects our relationship with God. When we have knowledge of God then we can meditate on God. It is impossible to meditate on an object that you have no knowledge of. Meditation on the things of God brings joy.

The cultural shift to a minimalist ethic, the idea of contemporary freedom, and the meaning of tolerance are the result of relativism’s effect on the culture. Relativism is the idea that there are no objective moral values, and morality is either decided by each person or each community. There are many problems with this view. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize others. If moral truths are subjective then each person gets to decide for himself what is right or wrong. Relativism cannot place blame for wrong doings. What

people do is neither right nor wrong. Right or wrong is up to each individual. Why should we expect each person to reach the same conclusion? Relativists cannot promote tolerance because any definition of tolerance is an objective definition that, if true, applies to everyone.^{30} But if morality is objective (meaning that there are things that are right and wrong for all people at all times), then freedom cannot mean that people can do what they want when they want. People will have responsibilities. They will be free to do what is right, and they will be free to do what is wrong. Being free means that we make choices of our own volition.

Conclusion

The loss of spiritual knowledge has caused a fractured society and people who lead fractured lives. The cultural shifts are a result of people not taking spiritual knowledge seriously. Spiritual knowledge must have absolutes to provide meaning for life. Francis Schaeffer observes, “we need absolutes if our existence is to have meaning—my existence, your existence, man’s existence.”^{31} Absolutes are learned by practicing the spiritual disciplines. A careful study of the Bible will bring knowledge ABOUT God; heart-surrender to Him, coupled with learning to abide in Him, will bring knowledge OF God. Prayer will keep people in touch with God. Fasting will break down the resistance of the flesh to living a spiritual life. The five shifts of contemporary culture mean death. The spiritual disciplines bring people spiritual life. True spirituality can only be found in Christ. Only meditation and learning about Christ can return wonder to life. I pray that through spiritual disciplines we may retain the wonder of a life given to us by God.

Notes

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3. Ibid., 93.
 4. Ibid., 94-96.
 5. Ibid., 95.
 6. Ibid., 96-98.
 7. Ibid., 98-99.
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 15. Moreland, 149.
 16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 565.
 17. Naugle, 199.
 18. Calvin, 567.
 19. Ibid., 568.
 20. Ibid., 571.
 21. Smith, 101.
 22. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 169.
 23. Calvin, 821.
 24. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45.
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 26. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 146.

27. Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse Which "Accompanied" It* (New York: Random House 2004), 21.

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29. Neal T. Anderson, Robert L. Saucy, *The Common Made Holy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1997), 204.

30. Francis J. Beckwith, Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Backer Books, 1998). 61-69.

31. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 205), 145.

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Biblical Worship

Kyle Skaggs provides a look at what constitutes worship that pleases God.

What is worship? Is it attending church service on Sundays? Is it singing hymns or praise songs? What does good worship look like?

It is generally understood that worship is an activity not limited to hymns or offerings on Sunday. Despite this, it is all too common that we find ourselves viewing it in just such a way. Worse, we find ourselves going through the motions of worship, but find ourselves treating it more and more like a chore.

The source of this problem is that we either do not have a biblical understanding of worship, or that we don't know how

to apply it. We need to define what constitutes worship in a biblical worldview, what worship is pleasing to the Lord, and what worship is not pleasing to the Lord.

Worship is any honor rendered to God that would be sinful to give to anything else. Worship is more than hymns and prayers. Worship can be rendered in every moment of our waking lives. It is worship when we learn and meditate on the Scriptures. The act of talking to God when we offer prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, or even when we pour our hearts out in grief, is also worship. When we give back our firstfruits. When we clothe and feed the needy in Christ's name. When we proclaim the gospel to those who do not know Christ. All of these activities and more are part of worship.

Worship That Pleases God

With worship defined, we can now jump to what worship is pleasing to God. The passage I am focusing on, to break down the components of what kind of worship God wants, is the burnt offering of Leviticus 1. Why the burnt offering? Because the themes and narrative techniques point towards proper worship.

The first things which stand out in this passage are recurring themes found in the rest of Leviticus. These themes are atonement and purification. God has made a covenant with the Israelites, saying, "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). A theme more specific to chapter 1, yet still present throughout, is goodwill from God and from man.

The first repeated instruction is that the sacrifice must be without blemish. This occurs three times. The second is the sprinkling or pouring of blood, which also -occurs three times. The third is the laying of hands on the offering at the Tabernacle before killing it. The fourth is an instruction to skin and divide the offering on the altar. The last repeated instruction is to wash the offering. Some key words and ideas

that are repeated include the need for one's sacrifice to be "without defect," atonement, the head and the fat of the offering, that all of the animal (except any explicitly described parts) is to be burnt, and finally, the idea that the smoke from the offering makes "an aroma pleasing to YHWH."

The sprinkling of blood, as translated in the New International Version, is technically correct, but there may be better choices of translation. The root word is זָרַק[zaraq] meaning to spurt, splatter, or sprinkle. Some translations have the word "cast" or "throw."^{1} There is nothing gentle in this act. Blood is life, and from dietary laws, it is clear that life is highly valued. The implication is that the loss of something as precious as life is required for atonement. Sanctification is conveyed through the shedding of blood on behalf of the person who gives the offering.^{2}

The reasons for laying one's hand on the offering's head are threefold. First, that it may be accepted as an offering on the person's behalf. Second, there must be a cost to this offering, and the act of laying hands declares ownership^{3}, so the owner takes responsibility for that cost. Third, the hands are laid so that the animal may atone for one's sin.^{4}

The innards and the legs of the offering are to be washed with water. Water and fire are both purifying agents in Jewish rituals. The innards contain excrement, and the legs gather dirt as the animal walks around. For birds, the crop and feathers are to be thrown down the eastern side of the altar with the ashes. Therefore, the act of washing the guts and legs of the bull and ram, as well as dumping the feathers and crop from an offering of turtle doves into the ashes, is a final act of purification before the offering is burnt and the smoke goes up to the Lord.

An "aroma pleasing to the Lord" is a recurring phrase. One translator writes that the Hebrew equivalent to "pleasing" is

“placating,” “tranquilizing,” “quieting,” and “soothing.”^{5} Another translates the word to mean “sweet,” “pleasant,” “restful,” and “delightful.” Some translations even use the word “savory.”^{6} Both translations work well in conveying the meaning of the text: that the sacrifice is pleasing to the Lord, so “a sweet aroma” or “a placating aroma” seems to be the best fit among the other meanings.

As you read through this passage, note how the offering provides atonement for sin. The burnt offering in chapter 1 is different from the sin offering found in chapter 4, which is for the atonement of accidental sins. The Hebrew word used in this passage, קָרְבָּן (qarban), can translate directly to “offering,” but when we compare the offering of Leviticus 1 to those in later chapters, we find different words used for offering. For example, Leviticus 4:1-34 uses the word חַטָּאת (haḥaṭṭāṭ), which translates roughly to “sin offering.” The offering in Leviticus 1 is קָרְבָּן (qarban), which simply refers to an offering in general. It is also used to mean “gift.”^{7} So, the offering of Leviticus 1 is a casual affair compared to the sin offering and offerings for holidays like Passover.

Both the gift and the giver must undergo purification. It also reveals bits of our nature relative to God’s early on, despite it being a freewill offering; the sinful nature of humanity necessitates that one receive atonement simply to worship God! From this, we gather that God demands reverence even in the most casual forms of worship. As previously stated, the purpose of the burnt offering was to provide atonement, to make oneself acceptable to God, and to please Him with one’s gift. It shows that God is merciful and patient, allowing for sin to be covered by the application of a sacrifice. It shows that He is just, He will not tolerate sin. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23), and something must die for any transgressions to be covered up. While the laying of hands on the sacrifice does not quite translate well to English, it

shows responsibility and a willingness to give from one's own possessions. This in turn shows that God desires whole-hearted worship.

Unpleasing Worship: Pagan Practice

As you can see, the most important part of worship is one's attitude towards God. This in turn requires a correct understanding of who God is, and His nature in relation to our worship. The sacrificial system in Leviticus is similar to that of the pagan cultures in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. By contrasting the nature of their gods and worship with that of the one true God, we can gain insight on what our attitude should be toward Him.

In the pagan myths of the Mediterranean and the Middle East like the *Enuma Elish*, humanity was frequently created as an afterthought. They were made to do tasks the gods couldn't be bothered to do themselves, or were made to pay tribute since they happened to exist. They are never made in God's image. For example, the Sumerian gods created humanity out of the blood and bones of an evil primordial being to serve them so they could focus on other tasks. In the Greek myths, man is created by the titan brothers, Epimetheus and Prometheus, to provide the gods with entertainment, and is only given the ability to walk upright like the gods because all other gifts had been foolishly given to all the animals.

Our God, on the other hand, deliberately created mankind in His own image. He told man (male and female) to fill the earth and have dominion over all in it. God made humanity the crowning jewel of His creation.

The pagan gods needed sacrifices like food offerings. They depended on humans to feed them with their offerings, and they gained strength from their worship, as can be seen in Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal who conducted increasingly desperate rituals in the hope that Baal would send fire down

from heaven.

Our God has no such needs. He does not need us to provide sustenance for Him because He needs nothing. He is the ultimate power and authority whether we worship him or not.

In contrast to the gods of the Canaanites, who were as sexually immoral, violent, and greedy if not more so than the culture that created them, God is wholly good. It can be seen from the emphasis of purity throughout Leviticus that God will not accept impurity in His people or in their offerings.

Finally, the worship of the Canaanites could not be separated from magical practice. Words had power, and thus prayers were formulaic in order to properly evoke the powers of the deity.^[8] A worshiper who said the right words and presented a suitable sacrifice in just the right way may receive blessings in return, like a magical sword or a good harvest. The Scriptures condemn this: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." (Matthew 6:7) The Lord is nothing like this; He knows the desires of our heart. He cannot be influenced by our worship, but blesses the obedient according to His good pleasure.

Unpleasing Worship: Cain's Offering

As we can see from the nature of God, how He prescribed the burnt offering in Leviticus, and how worship as practiced by the pagans is offensive to Him, the core of good worship is found in one's attitude towards God. Where the pagans did not have the benefit of a special revelation of God's word (though they are without excuse, Romans 1:20), those who did know the Lord also gave offerings that displeased Him. When we look at the next kind of offering that displeases God, we again see that one's worship is determined by the inclination of the heart.

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel both offered sacrifices to the Lord, but one was loved and the other was spurned because his works were evil and he treated the Lord's offering with contempt. Able offered the fat portions from the first of the flock, while Cain only offered some of his produce. When God rejected his offering, Cain became angry, and when God warned him to do what is right. Cain was unwilling to change his ways. That is why Cain murdered his brother, "because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Therefore, to respect God and His offering we must, as John puts it, abide in love. If we do not love God, then we cannot love the people around us who are made in His image. Rather, we easily come to hate them, even to the point of murder.

The self-righteous do not approach God with humility. They give only what they want when they want, live like the rest of the world, don't spend any time with God, and then wonder why they can't hear the Holy Spirit! It is impossible for the self-righteous to present a pleasing offering to the Lord.

This self-righteous offering appears again and again in the Old and New Testaments. This is why the prophets frequently decry the people's sacrifices. What they say concerning the offering shows just how much the offering was disrespected.

"When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 1:8)

Again in Isaiah, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught." (Isaiah 29:13)

In the New Testament, we have the example of Ananias and his

wife Sapphira, who lied about the portion of their offering and were struck dead. In the gospels, we have the Pharisees whom Jesus called hypocrites. Their actions appear to be righteous, but the inclination of their hearts render their worship worthless.

Application

So what does this mean for us? The foundation of God-pleasing worship is the inclination of our heart. It is our attitude towards our relationship with God that determines how we worship. Pagan-style worship approaches God as if He were inattentive, finite, and uncaring. If we can evoke His name just right, if our offerings are good, then we have an 'in' with God. Ultimately, we are trying to bribe God.

Cain's worship was characterized by apathy and self-righteousness. Outside of church, one dedicates no time to God. In finance, in time, in prayer, and in actions people offer up the scraps from the prosperity God has given them. They say that Christ is Lord, yet are too self-righteous and self-reliant to listen to the Holy Spirit.

We are obligated to worship God simply because *He is*. He doesn't need it, but He desires it. As a personal God, worship is a part of His relationship with us. God is good. Therefore, we must approach Him with humility. Good worship is giving Him the respect He deserves as our creator and ruler of the universe.

What we offer in worship needs to be pure. Our hearts need to be reconciled to God, and we need to approach Him with humility and the respect He deserves as our creator. The key to God-pleasing worship is the inclination of the heart.

Furthermore, worship is tied to everything we do day to day. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, . . . you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). So even when we are not

singing praises, praying, or meditating on God's word, we can still be worshiping, because our deeds are a kind of offering. This means we need to consistently choose to abide in love, or we will stumble over Cain's sin. Whatever we do, even if it is just a morning devotional, we should examine the state of our heart and ask the Holy Spirit to align it with God's.

Notes

1. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Academic, 1994), 284.1.
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5. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 629.2
6. Strong, The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), #5207.
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The Value of Christian Doctrine and Apologetics

Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for why Christian doctrine and apologetics are important for spiritual growth and maturity.

Just prior to beginning college, I committed my life to Christ. Naturally, as a new believer wanting to grow in my faith, I embarked upon a program of daily Bible reading. When I came to Paul's letter to Titus in the New Testament, I was both struck and inspired by a particular command, which I found nestled among others, there in the first chapter.



Paul reminded Titus, whom he had left on the island of Crete, that he wanted him to “straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders” in the local churches which had been established (Titus 1:5). After listing various spiritual and moral qualifications that an elder was to have, Paul went on to insist that he must also “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). When I first read those words, it was as if a light went on inside my head and I thought, “That’s exactly what I would like to do! I want to be able to ‘encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it’” (Titus 1:9). Paul’s words thus encouraged me to take up, in a serious way, the study of Christian doctrine and apologetics.

But what exactly do I mean by “Christian doctrine” and “apologetics”? At its most basic level, Christian doctrine is essentially the same thing as Christian teaching. Such teaching aims at providing a logically consistent and “coherent explication of what the Christian believes.”[\[1\]](#) Apologetics is a bit more complicated. It comes from the Greek term, *apologia*, and means “defense.” It was often used in law courts in the ancient world.[\[2\]](#) Indeed, the book of Acts records several instances in which the Apostle Paul was called upon to “make a defense” of himself before various governing authorities, like Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (e.g., Acts 24:10; 25:8; 26:1-2).

Of course, when we’re talking about *Christian* apologetics, we’re concerned with “making a defense” of the truth-claims of

Christianity. The Apostle Peter tells us, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). Christian doctrine and apologetics play an important role in the life and health of the church. So please keep reading as we delve more deeply into these issues.

The Value of Christian Doctrine

Why is Christian doctrine important for the life and health of the church? The Apostle Paul told Titus that he wanted him to appoint elders in the local church who would be able to “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). The teaching of sound Christian doctrine is important for several reasons, but for now let me simply mention two. First, sound Christian doctrine helps us to learn what is true about both God and ourselves. Second, it reminds us of the right way to live in light of such truths. And both of these are essential for the life and health of the church.

First, it’s important to know what is true about God and ourselves. Indeed, our eternal destiny depends on it! Not only must we know that God is holy and righteous and will punish all sin, we must also realize that we are sinners (Numbers 14:18; Romans 3:23). But this, in itself, would lead to despair. Hence, we must also understand that God loves us and sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 4:14). We need to grasp that forgiveness and reconciliation with God are freely available to those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith (Acts 3:19; 16:31). Sound Christian doctrine is thus essential for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:9-13; 2 John 1:9). Without it, true spiritual life and health is impossible.

But this does not exhaust the importance of Christian doctrine. For once we are saved through faith in Christ, God then calls us to grow up and become like his Son—and this

would be exceedingly difficult apart from instruction in sound Christian doctrine. As Christian philosopher Bill Craig observes, “If we want to live correctly for Christ . . . we need to first think correctly about Christ. If your thinking is skewed and off-base, it is going to affect your life and your Christian discipleship.”^{3} Indeed, the Apostle Paul contrasts Christian *maturity*, characterized by genuine “knowledge of the Son of God,” with spiritual *immaturity*, characterized by a lack of such knowledge and a proneness to being deceived (Ephesians 4:13-14).

God calls us to Christian maturity—and instruction in Christian doctrine plays an important role in our spiritual growth. But there is also a role for Christian apologetics—and we must now turn to consider that.

A Defense of Christian Apologetics

Many people question the value of Christian apologetics for the life and health of the church.^{4} They contend that it’s impossible to “argue” anyone into becoming a Christian. Instead of making a defense for the truth of Christianity, we ought rather to invest our limited resources in preaching the gospel of Christ, trusting that God will open people’s hearts and draw them to himself.

Now while I certainly agree that we should be preaching the gospel, and trusting that God will use it to draw men and women to himself, this negative view of apologetics is frankly unbiblical, untrue, and shortsighted.

In the first place, such a view is unbiblical. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul used arguments and evidence to convince their listeners of particular theological truths (Matthew 22:15-46; Acts 17:16-34). Moreover, the Apostle Peter tells us to always be ready to “make a defense” (or offer an apologetic) to those who ask about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). A negative view of Christian

apologetics thus runs counter to the teaching of Scripture.

Second, it's simply untrue that no one ever comes to Christ through apologetic arguments and evidence.^{5} Indeed, sometimes the Holy Spirit actually uses arguments and evidence to draw people to Christ!^{6} And while such people may admittedly be in the minority, they can be extremely influential in commending the faith to others, for they are often prepared to offer good reasons for believing that Christianity is really true!

Finally, a negative view of Christian apologetics is shortsighted. The great theologian J. Gresham Machen argued that we should aim to create "favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel." Along these lines, he noted the difficulty of attempting to do evangelism once we've given up offering an intellectually credible case for the truth of Christianity. "We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer," he said, "and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation . . . to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion."^{7} Machen understood that neglecting apologetics is shortsighted. For unless we offer arguments and evidence, we make it that much easier for people to simply shrug their shoulders and continue ignoring Christianity's truth-claims.

Having now dismantled the arguments *against* apologetics, we'll next consider its *benefits* for the life and health of the church.

The Value of Christian Apologetics

Christian apologetics is concerned to offer a robust defense for the truth of Christianity. Hence, training in Christian apologetics can be of great value for the life and health of

the church. This is because such training helps to instill within believers a deep confidence that Christianity is really true. And when one becomes convinced that Christianity is really true, one is typically more likely to share one's faith with others—and less likely to abandon the faith when confronted with various social, cultural, and intellectual pressures.

Let's consider that first point, that when one becomes convinced of Christianity's truth, one is more likely to share this truth with others. Many Christians admit to being hesitant about sharing their faith because they're afraid someone will ask them a question that they are ill-prepared to answer.[{8}](#) Training in apologetics can help counteract this fear. Granted, one may still be asked a question that is difficult to answer. But apologetics training can help alleviate the fear associated with such situations by helping believers understand that good answers are available—even if they can't remember what those answers are! To give an illustration, if I learn that there is excellent evidence that a particular drug can cure some disease, then I will be far more confident about sharing this fact with others—even if I can't answer all their questions about *how* the medicine works. I may not remember exactly *how* it works, but I do know that there is very good evidence *that* it works. And knowing this, I will naturally be more confident telling others about it, even if I can't answer all their questions about how or why.

Moreover, training in apologetics can help insulate believers from abandoning the faith, for they now know that there are good reasons to believe that Christianity is really true. Of course, most people who abandon the faith do so for *non-intellectual* reasons. Still, as Paul Chamberlain observes, "A number of vocal critics who have moved from Christianity to atheism cite intellectual difficulties with Christianity" as a prime reason for quitting the faith.[{9}](#) While apologetics training can't completely prevent such

outcomes, it can make them less likely. After all, it's far more difficult to abandon a view once you've become sincerely convinced of its truth.

Our Witness to the World

Over a hundred years ago, the theologian J. Gresham Machen forcefully argued that, for the faithful Christian, all of life—including the arts and sciences and every sphere of intellectual endeavor—must be humbly consecrated to the service of God.[{10}](#) Indeed, this should be true not only for every individual Christian in particular, but for the entire church in general. Our witness to the world depends on it.

Machen wrote:

Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but . . . all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God. . . . The Church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man.[{11}](#)

In this article, we've been considering the importance of Christian doctrine and apologetics for the life and health of the church. And clearly, Machen's proposal cannot be effectively implemented apart from a healthy understanding of these issues on the part of the church. After all, how can "all of human thought" be brought "into some relation to the gospel" unless we first understand what the gospel is? How can views "be demonstrated as false" unless we first have some idea of what's true—and how to reason correctly about it? How can views "be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God" unless we first understand such views, along with how and why they can be useful in advancing God's kingdom? If we are ever to have a hope of carrying out a project like this, in a

manner that is both practically effective and faithful to our God, then sound Christian doctrine and apologetics must occupy a central role in our endeavors.

Christian doctrine and apologetics are not antithetical to the life and health of the church. They are rather of fundamental importance. Only by knowing what we believe, and why it's really true, can we fulfill Peter's injunction to always be ready "to make a defense" to anyone who asks about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). And only thus can we progress to true spiritual maturity, avoiding the "craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:13-14). So if we care about the life and health of the church—along with its witness to the world—we must encourage a healthy dose of respect for sound Christian doctrine and apologetics.

Notes

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3. William Lane Craig, "Foundations of Christian Doctrine (Part 1)," *Reasonable Faith*, October 22, 2014, accessed August 22, 2018, www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-foundations-of-christian-doctrine/foundations-of-christian-doctrine-part-1/.
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5. See, for example, the "Testimonials" section of the

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6. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 192.

7. J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7.

8. Indeed, entire books have been written to help believers feel better prepared for such conversations. See, for example, Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask: (With Answers)* (Tyndale, 2010).

9. Paul Chamberlain, "Why People Stop Believing," *Christian Research Journal* 41, no. 4:11.

10. Machen, "Christianity and Culture," 5.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

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The Value of Suffering: A Christian Perspective

Sue Bohlin looks at suffering from a Christian perspective. Applying a biblical worldview to this difficult subject results in a distinctly different approach to suffering than our natural inclination of blame and self pity.

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



There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. How this has encouraged and strengthened me in the valleys of suffering and pain! In this essay I'll be discussing the value of suffering, an unhappy non-negotiable of life in a fallen world.

Suffering Prepares Us to Be the Bride of Christ

Among the many reasons God allows us to suffer, this is my personal favorite: it prepares us to be the radiant bride of Christ. The Lord Jesus has a big job to do, changing His ragamuffin church into a glorious bride worthy of the Lamb. Ephesians 5:26-27 tells us He is making us holy by washing us with the Word—presenting us to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Suffering develops holiness in unholy people. But *getting there* is painful in the Lord’s “laundry room.” When you use bleach to get rid of stains, it’s a harsh process. Getting rid of wrinkles is even more painful: ironing means a combination of heat plus pressure. Ouch! No wonder suffering hurts!



But developing holiness in us is a worthwhile, extremely important goal for the Holy One who is our divine Bridegroom. We learn in Hebrews 12:10 that we are enabled to share in His holiness through the discipline of enduring hardship. More ouch! Fortunately, the same book assures us that discipline is a sign of God’s love (Heb. 12:6). Oswald Chambers reminds us that “God has one destined end for mankind—holiness. His one aim is the production of saints.”[\[1\]](#)

It’s also important for all wives, but most especially the future wife of the Son of God, to have a submissive heart. Suffering makes us more determined to obey God; it teaches us to be submissive. The psalmist learned this lesson as he wrote in Psalm 119:67: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”

The Lord Jesus has His work cut out for Him in purifying us for Himself (Titus 2:14). Let’s face it, left to ourselves we are a dirty, messy, fleshly people, and we desperately need to

be made pure. As hurtful as it is, suffering can purify us if we submit to the One who has a loving plan for the pain.

Jesus wants not just a *pure* bride, but a mature one as well—and suffering produces growth and maturity in us. James 1:2-4 reminds us that trials produce perseverance, which makes us mature and complete. And Romans 5:3-4 tells us that we can actually rejoice in our sufferings, because, again, they produce perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope. The Lord is creating for Himself a bride with sterling character, but it's not much fun getting there. I like something else Oswald Chambers wrote: "Sorrow burns up a great amount of shallowness."[\[2\]](#)

We usually don't have much trouble understanding that our Divine Bridegroom loves us; but we can easily forget how much He longs for us to love Him back. Suffering scoops us out, making our hearts bigger so that we can hold more love for Him. It's all part of a well-planned courtship. He does know what He's doing . . . we just need to trust Him.

Suffering Allows Us to Minister Comfort to Others Who Suffer

One of the most rewarding reasons that suffering has value is experienced by those who can say with conviction, "I know how you feel. I've been in your shoes." Suffering prepares us to minister comfort to others who suffer.

Feeling isolated is one of the hardest parts of suffering. It can feel like you're all alone in your pain, and that makes it so much worse. The comfort of those who have known that same pain is inexpressible. It feels like a warm blanket being draped around your soul. But in order for someone to say those powerful words—"I know just how you feel because I've been there"—that person had to walk through the same difficult valley first.

Ray and I lost our first baby when she was born too prematurely to survive. It was the most horrible suffering we've ever known. But losing Becky has enabled me to weep with those who weep with the comforting tears of one who has experienced that deep and awful loss. It's a wound that—by God's grace—has never fully healed so that I can truly empathize with others out of the very real pain I still feel. Talking about my loss puts me in touch with the unhealed part of the grief and loss that will always hurt until I see my daughter again in heaven. One of the most incredibly comforting things we can ever experience is someone else's tears for us. So when I say to a mother or father who has also lost a child, "I hurt with you, because I've lost a precious one too," my tears bring warmth and comfort in a way that someone who has never known that pain cannot offer.

One of the most powerful words of comfort I received when we were grieving our baby's loss was from a friend who said, "Your pain may not be about just you. It may well be about other people, preparing you to minister comfort and hope to someone in your future who will need what you can give them because of what you're going through right now. And if you are faithful to cling to God now, I promise He will use you greatly to comfort others later." That perspective was like a sweet balm to my soul, because it showed me that my suffering was not pointless.

There's another aspect of bringing comfort to those in pain. Those who have suffered tend not to judge others experiencing similar suffering. Not being judged is a great comfort to those who hurt. When you're in pain, your world narrows down to mere survival, and it's easy for others to judge you for not "following the rules" that should only apply to those whose lives aren't being swallowed by the pain monster.

Suffering often develops compassion and mercy in us. Those who suffer tend to have tender hearts toward others who are in pain. We can comfort others with the comfort that we have

received from God (2 Cor. 1:4) because we have experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit being there for us, walking alongside us in our pain. Then we can turn around and walk alongside others in their pain, showing the compassion that our own suffering has produced in us.

Suffering Develops Humble Dependence on God

Marine Corps recruiter Randy Norfleet survived the Oklahoma City bombing despite losing 40 percent of his blood and needing 250 stitches to close his wounds. He never lost consciousness in the ambulance because he was too busy praying prayers of thanksgiving for his survival. When doctors said he would probably lose the sight in his right eye, Mr. Norfleet said, "Losing an eye is a small thing. Whatever brings you closer to God is a blessing. Through all this I've been brought closer to God. I've become more dependent on Him and less on myself." [\[3\]](#)

Suffering is excellent at teaching us humble dependence on God, the only appropriate response to our Creator. Ever since the fall of Adam, we keep forgetting that God created us to depend on Him and not on ourselves. We keep wanting to go our own way, pretending that we are God. Suffering is powerfully able to get us back on track.

Sometimes we hurt so much we can't pray. We are forced to depend on the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the saints, needing them to go before the throne of God on our behalf. Instead of seeing that inability to pray as a personal failure, we can rejoice that our perception of being totally needy corresponds to the truth that we really are that needy. 2 Corinthians 1:9 tells us that hardships and sufferings happen "so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Suffering brings a "one day at a time-ness" to our survival.

We get to the point of saying, "Lord, I can only make it through today if You help me . . . if You take me through today . . . or the next hour . . . or the next few minutes." One of my dearest friends shared with me the prayer from a heart burning with emotional pain: "Papa, I know I can make it through the next fifteen minutes if You hold me and walk me through it." Suffering has taught my friend the lesson of total, humble dependence on God.

As painful as it is, suffering strips away the distractions of life. It forces us to face the fact that we are powerless to change other people and most situations. The fear that accompanies suffering drives us to the Father like a little kid burying his face in his daddy's leg. Recognizing our own powerlessness is actually the key to experience real power because we have to acknowledge our dependence on God before His power can flow from His heart into our lives.

The disciples experienced two different storms out on the lake. The Lord's purpose in both storms was to train them to stop relying on their physical eyes and use their spiritual eyes. He wanted them to grow in trust and dependence on the Father. He allows us to experience storms in our lives for the same purpose: to learn to depend on God.

I love this paraphrase of Romans 8:28: "The Lord may not have planned that this should overtake me, but He has most certainly permitted it. Therefore, though it were an attack of an enemy, by the time it reaches me, it has the Lord's permission, and therefore all is well. He will make it work together with all life's experiences for good."

Suffering Displays God's Strength Through Our Weakness

God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing. The classic Scripture for the concept that suffering displays God's strength through

our weakness is found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, where we learn that God's grace is sufficient for us, for His power is perfected in weakness. Paul said he delighted in weaknesses, hardships, and difficulties "for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Our culture disdains weakness, but our frailty is a sign of God's workmanship in us. It gets us closer to what we were created to be—completely dependent on God. Several years ago I realized that instead of despising the fact that polio had left me with a body that was weakened and compromised, susceptible to pain and fatigue, I could choose to rejoice in it. My weakness made me more like a fragile, easily broken window than a solid brick wall. But just as sunlight pours through a window but is blocked by a wall, I discovered that other people could see God's strength and beauty in me because of the window-like nature of my weakness! Consider how the Lord Jesus was the exact representation of the glory of the Father—I mean, He was all window and no walls! He was completely dependent on the Father, choosing to become weak so that God's strength could shine through Him. And He was the strongest person the world has ever seen. Not His own strength; He displayed the Father's strength because of that very weakness.

The reason His strength can shine through us is because we know God better through suffering. One wise man I heard said, "I got theology in seminary, but I learned reality through trials. I got facts in Sunday School, but I learned faith through trusting God in difficult circumstances. I got truth from studying, but I got to know the Savior through suffering."

Sometimes our suffering isn't a consequence of our actions or even someone else's. God is teaching other beings about Himself and His loved ones—us—as He did with Job. The point of Job's trials was to enable heavenly beings to see God glorified in Job. Sometimes He trusts us with great pain in

order to make a point, whether the intended audience is believers, unbelievers, or the spirit realm. Quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada, no stranger to great suffering, writes, “Whether a godly attitude shines from a brain-injured college student or from a lonely man relegated to a back bedroom, the response of patience and perseverance counts. God points to the peaceful attitude of suffering people to teach others about Himself. He not only teaches those we rub shoulders with every day, but He instructs the countless millions of angels and demons. The hosts in heaven stand amazed when they observe God sustain hurting people with His peace.”[{4}](#)

I once heard Charles Stanley say that nothing attracts the unbeliever like a saint suffering successfully. Joni Tada said, “You were made for one purpose, and that is to make God real to those around you.”[{5}](#) The reality of God’s power, His love, and His character are made very, very real to a watching world when we trust Him in our pain.

Suffering Gets Us Ready for Heaven

Pain is inevitable because we live in a fallen world. 1 Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us that we are “destined for trials.” We don’t have a choice whether we will suffer—our choice is to go through it by ourselves or with God.

Suffering teaches us the difference between the important and the transient. It prepares us for heaven by teaching us how unfulfilling life on earth is and helping us develop an eternal perspective. Suffering makes us homesick for heaven.

Deep suffering of the soul is also a taste of hell. After many sleepless nights wracked by various kinds of pain, my friend Jan now knows what she was saved from. Many Christians only know they’re saved without grasping what it is Christ has delivered them from. Jan’s suffering has given her an appreciation of the reality of heaven, and she’s been changed forever.

I have an appreciation of heaven gained from a different experience. As my body weakens from the lifelong impact of polio, to be honest, I have a deep frustration with it that makes me grateful for the perfect, beautiful, completely working resurrection body waiting for me on the other side. My husband once told me that heaven is more real to me than anyone he knows. Suffering has done that for me. Paul explained what happens in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

“Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

One of the effects of suffering is to loosen our grasp on this life, because we shouldn't be thinking that life in a fallen world is as wonderful as we sometimes think it is. Pastor Dick Bacon once said, “If this life were easy, we'd just love it too much. If God didn't make it painful, we'd never let go of it.” Suffering reminds us that we live in an abnormal world. Suffering is abnormal—our souls protest, “This isn't right!” We need to be reminded that we are living in the post-fall “Phase 2.” The perfect Phase 1 of God's beautiful, suffering-free creation was ruined when Adam and Eve fell. So often, people wonder what kind of cruel God would deliberately make a world so full of pain and suffering. They've lost track of history. The world God originally made isn't the one we experience. Suffering can make us long for the new heaven and the new earth where God will set all things right again.

Sometimes suffering literally prepares us for heaven. Cheryl's in-laws, both beset by lingering illnesses, couldn't understand why they couldn't just die and get it over with. But after three long years of holding on, during a visit from Cheryl's pastor, the wife trusted Christ on her deathbed and

the husband received assurance of his salvation. A week later the wife died, followed in six months by her husband. They had continued to suffer because of God's mercy and patience, who did not let them go before they were ready for heaven.

Suffering dispels the cloaking mists of inconsequential distractions of this life and puts things in their proper perspective. My friend Pete buried his wife a few years ago after a battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. One morning I learned that his car had died on the way to church, and I said something about what a bummer it was. Pete just shrugged and said, "This is nothing." That's what suffering will do for us. Trials are light and momentary afflictions . . . but God redeems them all.

Notes

1. Oswald Chambers, *Our Utmost for His Highest*, September 1.
2. Chambers, June 25.
3. *National and International Religion Report*, Vol. 9:10, May 1, 1995, 1
4. Joni Eareckson Tada, *When Is It Right to Die?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 122.
5. Tada, 118.

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Apologetics and Spiritual Skirmishing

Kyle Skaggs urges Christians to use the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6 in engaging in apologetics.

As I was working towards my degree at Dallas Baptist

University I did volunteer work with an online ministry. There, I encountered people from all walks of life; all of them having questions about Christ and Christianity. For a while, I was doing well. I found joy in encouraging and counseling other believers. I also learned to tell the difference between non-believers who were willing to listen and those who were only there to argue.

Around a week from graduation I logged to the ministry's website feeling confident. I'd spent hours reviewing various arguments and counterarguments, I was certain I would use what I had learned over four years to lead the conversation to the Gospel. This was not what happened. Instead, the people I talked to became either confused or frustrated before leaving. Figuring I was just having one of those bad days, I thought nothing of it. The same thing happened the next day. Now I was conflicted. I wondered why I was ineffective, because everything I said was supported by Scripture, so I logged off and puzzled over what I was doing wrong. While I was lost in my thoughts, a very clear voice in my head said, "You cannot lecture people into the Kingdom of God." I had forgotten 1 Peter 3:15; "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." That rebuke from the Holy Spirit sent me on a journey of reflection on the spiritual skirmishes that we so easily lose sight of in our daily routine.

Spiritual Warfare

"Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage." [\[1\]](#) Our adversaries are the rulers, authorities, and the powers of this dark world. (Ephesians 6:12) Every ideology, philosophy, and worldview not of the Gospel is controlled by the spiritual

forces of darkness.

The devil knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12), so he is intent on dragging as many souls down with him as he can. To his annoyance, if you have already been saved by grace through faith, and are now saved, you are called to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). He is resourceful, and if he can't stop you from having a relationship with God, then he will use every trick to make you as ineffective as possible in your walk with Christ, and in evangelism.

The Devil and his forces are relentless. Whenever we attempt to evangelize, every gap in our defenses can and will be exploited. How are we Christians to contend with these forces of darkness? Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God so that we can take our stand against the Devil's schemes. Let's take a look at the parts of the spiritual armor God provides.



The Belt of Truth

First, we must remain grounded in the truth. Ephesians 6:14 refers to the Belt of Truth, which holds our equipment within easy reach. When we face an enemy whose only weapons are lies and deceptions, we have the advantage. We have nothing to hide! All we need to do is tell the truth!

To wear the belt is to be ready. There has been increasing pressure to ignore fundamental Christian teachings for the sake of convenience. Do not do this. Know your scripture and gird yourself in the truth of the Gospel.

The Helmet of Salvation and the Breastplate of Righteousness

Second, we must wear the helmet of salvation (Ephesians 6:17) and the breastplate of righteousness (6:14) to turn aside any attacks that slip through our defenses. In those days, just as it is now, the helmet and breastplate are essential equipment to protect the head and the heart, and just one of the things separating the true soldier from the levy and the ad hoc militia.

In the same way, the certainty of our salvation and the righteousness of Christ are key pieces of our armor. As I have said before, Satan is ruthless. He will use every sin you have committed to shift your focus away from those who need Christ, and onto yourself. Being assured of our salvation and our righteousness before God is our greatest defense against these attacks.

The Gospel of Peace

What made the Romans such a formidable force? Discipline and adaptability. Being able to march long distances and maneuver across a variety of terrain. Timing and distance determine the victor of any confrontation. To do this, they needed shoes that were durable and able to grip the ground firmly.



With the readiness that comes from the Gospel of Peace (Ephesians 6:15), we can rapidly move to where the Lord needs us. “[God’s Soldier’s] movements are dictated by the needs of the Gospel witness.”{2}

The Shield of Faith



We are also told to take up the Shield of Faith (Ephesians 6:16) to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. The favored shield in the time Ephesians was written was the Roman *scutum*, a large shield that protected most of the soldier’s body,

enabling the Romans to protect both themselves and each other in tight formations without sacrificing their defense when fighting in looser formations. Most deaths in ancient battles occurred after, during, and after a rout. Therefore projectiles were used to disrupt and to instill fear before the two sides met in melee. Standing firm against hails of projectiles was key to surviving the battle.

It is the same with all believers. Our faith is our primary defensive and offensive tool. People who have faith in Christ are willing to risk being made to look foolish. They are confident in the hope they have in Christ, and are therefore enabled to do great things. People who act out of faith inspire others to do the same. Our faith also protects us from the feelings, falsehoods, and ideas the Devil likes to use to discourage us. If we are discouraged from our walk, then we have already lost.

The Sword of the Spirit

Finally, Ephesians 6:17 refers to the Sword of the Spirit, or the word of God. In conjunction with the *scutum* was the *gladius*, a short sword primarily used for thrusting and short cuts. It was the legionary's primary weapon. After throwing their *pila* (specialized javelins) to disrupt the enemy formation, the Romans drew their swords and closed the distance to engage in hand-to-hand fighting. Their armor and discipline enabled them to weather the brutal melee far better than their opponents. Ideally, this caused the enemy to rout.



There is a good reason the word of God is described as a sword in other passages. It is absolute truth. Revelations 9:15 and Hebrews 4:12 describe God's word as a double-edged sword. In Hebrews, Paul says "it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Like a sword, learning to use God's word effectively requires constant training. Christians should therefore study and seek to live according to the word so they can stand firm when confronted by the Enemy.

By being willing to close in, to deliver the word of God straight into the heart of the matter, shrewdly providing an answer for our faith with gentleness and respect, we can establish common ground with those who do not know Christ, thus opening the way for them to hear the gospel. We do this knowing full well that friends and even family may hate us for confronting the world. Because we are willing to push through, we are able to form relationships with people and show what it means to walk with Christ! As with Roman equipment in Jesus'

day, the armor of God is tailor made to allow us to safely close the distance with the enemy, and with the word of God, drive them from the field.

All we have to do is put it on.

Notes

1. Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, 1952.
2. Ellicott, C. J. (1970). *Ellicott's commentary on the Whole Bible Volumes VII-VIII: Acts to Revelation*. Zondervan Publishing House. 1959.

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God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally

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

Creating God Space

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



to have spiritual conversations naturally?

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

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

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

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

more detail.

Spiritual Conversation-Killers

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

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

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

Okay, so how do we approach such conversations wisely? In my opinion, the best way to have good *spiritual* conversations

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

Wondering Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations

In *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally*, Doug has four great chapters on *noticing*, *servicing*, *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.[{20}](#) 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.”[{21}](#)

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! [\[22\]](#)

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

respond. But by taking this approach, we can go a long way toward restoring the relationship.[{23}](#)

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

Notes

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/
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 Professor: Why Are You a Christian? – When Challenged, Can You Defend Your Faith in Christ

Are our adults ready to give a defense of the gospel? When challenged, can they give a reasonable explanation of their faith? Dr. Bohlin presents a sobering view of this question based upon years of experience questioning high school and college-age students on the basis for their belief in Christ. By exposing their lack of cogent answers to questions they may be asked, he challenges them to spend time exploring the questions and developing biblical worldview-based answers.

The Professor

Over the last ten years, I have used a very effective technique to help teens realize their unpreparedness for the step toward college. It seems our young people are heading

into public and even Christian colleges thinking they are ready for the challenge to their faith that higher learning can be.

✘ Probe Ministries has sponsored a [college prep conference](#) since 1991 that was designed to help young people gain some insights and even some knowledge on how to address the intellectual challenges that college will provide.

If you remember the thousands of college radicals who protested and picketed in the '60s and '70s, they found their push for change was not very effective. Instead, many of them stayed in college, obtained Masters Degrees and PhDs. After all, it was easier than getting a real job! As a result, they are now your children's professors!

The college campus was an anti-Christian breeding ground several decades ago and now it is even worse. Christianity is not so much openly mocked as it is marginalized and deemed a false and mischievous mythology.

If you haven't already heard some of these statistics, you need to hold onto your hat.

In 2007, LifeWay surveyed 23- to 30-year-olds and found that seventy percent had taken at least a one year break from church during their college years.[{1}](#) Now, almost two-thirds of these return to some level of church attendance, but mainly to please family or friends who encouraged them to return. That means that most of our church youth are making many of their life decisions, including marriage and career, apart from a church context. Even many who return carry numerous scars from bad choices during those years.[{2}](#)

With this statistical background, it's plain our young people need some preparation before going on to college or the military. But as most parents of teens know, just telling them they need this is less than likely to be convincing.

Enter the Professor. The technique I mentioned at the beginning is to impersonate an atheistic college professor doing research on the religious beliefs of young people. Sometimes the students know I am playing a role with them, but occasionally I play the professor and the students are none the wiser.

A Simple Question

When I step to the front of the room, I introduce myself as Professor Hymie Schwartz (a name borrowed from my late colleague Jerry Solomon who played this role far better than I do). I tell the group that, since I am conducting research on the religious beliefs of young people, their youth pastor, counselor, principal, teacher—whatever, has allowed me to visit with them.

I begin the conversation something like this: “Since this is a church or Christian school I presume you are all Christians. Is anyone not a Christian?” Of course no one raises their hand. But I am always aware that some may indeed not be believers and may not appreciate my questioning so I am always paying attention.

At this point I simply call on someone, usually someone who isn't really paying attention or is engrossed in conversation with a neighbor. “You! Are you a Christian?” No one has ever answered no. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, with hands casually stuck in my pockets, I demand, “Why?”

Students are paying attention now. This is for real. Now consider my question for yourself. If Peter warns us to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks to give a defense for the hope that we have, this is a pretty basic question. In our highly secular culture, if someone finds out you're a Christian, they may indeed ask you why. Peter says you ought to have an answer.

But this simple question why is usually something our young people, and even their parents, have never really considered. Their Christian faith is certainly something they would claim is central to their lives, but the dumbfounded looks on their faces tells me repeatedly that this question is a new one.

It's usually about this time that any parents sitting in the back are suddenly quite relieved I'm not talking to them!

By asking such questions, I can get them pretty riled up and confused. The point is not to have fun but to help them see that they need to be prepared and think a little about why Christianity is important to them and why they think it's true.

“I Asked Jesus into My Heart!”

Having their Christianity questioned usually comes as a surprise and even shock. Rather than directly answering the question, they try to tell me *how* they became a Christian. It usually takes the form of confidently saying they asked Jesus into their heart.

The professor quickly fires back, “You asked Jesus into your heart?! That sounds pretty gross, really. What's he doing in there with all that blood? Yuck!” That always gets a surprised reaction and a little befuddlement. The student typically tries to recover by saying something like, “No, I mean it's like I trusted Jesus as my Savior.”

Again the professor will fire back quickly with a question like, “Why did you do that?” or “Savior? What did you need saving from?” I think you can see where this is going. It really is not difficult to pick something from what he or she said and challenge it. I either pretend I don't understand what they said, forcing them to better explain themselves (which is rare), or I deliberately ask them why they think that way, or how they know that.

In answer to “How do you know that?” I am often told that “It says so in the Bible!” They usually can’t tell me where the Bible says that. I also ask if the Bible is true, and they say it is. But when I ask, “How do you know it’s true?” the blank stare reemerges.

Sometimes a student will say, “Because it’s the word of God!” Now I can really dig a little deeper. In response to further questioning, they usually can’t tell me where the Bible says it’s the Word of God nor can they tell me why the Bible is different from The Book of Mormon or the Qur’an. If there is a youth pastor or chaplain present there is usually an embarrassed look on their face or a head buried in their hands.

By this time the class is very tense and full of nervous laughter. When I reach a dead end with a student—for instance when they say, “I don’t know” with a very resigned and defeated voice—I look for one of the laughing students and ask, “What about you?” Of course that gets everybody’s attention again and off we go.

While I admit I have a little fun playing this role, it never ceases to break my heart at how ill-prepared our young people are to follow Peter’s advice to always be prepared with an answer. I have yet to find a student in ten years who is willing and able to go toe-to-toe with the professor.

“You’re a Narrow-Minded, Self-Righteous Bigot!”

Here are three other directions our conversations have frequently taken.

When I have challenged students to tell me why they think or believe Christianity is true, some will turn to their own subjective experience. Technically, there is nothing wrong with this, specifically when speaking to a Christian audience.

But someone who doesn't even believe in God will frequently find ways to truly make fun of this element.

A student may describe that Jesus speaks to them in their prayer time, to which I quickly ask what His voice sounds like or how they know it was Jesus and not indigestion. The blank stares usually resume at this point. We have become so comfortable in our Christian bubble sometimes that we frequently don't see how unintelligible our language is to those outside the community of faith. It's tough to share the gospel that way.

Sometimes a student will interject that they believe in Jesus because that's what their family has taught them or it's what they learned in church. I usually pounce on that pretty quickly and repeat that this student believes Christianity is true because their parents told them so. The student usually agrees. After commending them for honoring their parents I tell them that's really pretty stupid. Pausing a second for the shock to register, I go on about the boy raised in India whose parents are Hindu and he respects his parents and believes Hinduism is true, so the boy in India and this student are both headed to heaven because they trusted their parents!

One time a student stammered around and eventually agreed with my statement as his youth pastor put his head in his hands.

Finally in talking about salvation I ask what happens to those who don't believe in Jesus. Most will hesitatingly say they go to hell. The professor predictably rants, "Just because I don't believe the same fairy tale as you, I'm going to hell?" When they predictably shake their head yes, I get down eye to eye and spit out, "You're a narrow minded, self-righteous bigot!"

Always Be Ready to Give an Answer, with Gentleness and Respect

Students enjoy the interactive nature of this routine even though they are routinely embarrassed by their inability to handle the challenge. When Peter admonished all of us to always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that we have, yet with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15), they fail miserably. Perhaps as a parent, you may be glad that I don't do this with adult groups.

Often students will try to turn the conversation in their favor by asking the professor a question. I quickly dismiss that idea by simply answering that *I'm* asking the questions. But when we're done, if time allows I attempt to leave them with hope by quickly summarizing how I, Dr. Ray Bohlin, Vice-President of Probe Ministries, would answer the same question.

Here's the outline of my response. In a calm voice I quickly assert that I know there is a God. As a scientist I look principally at how marvelously our universe, galaxy, solar system, and planet are designed for complex life here on earth. The number of highly improbable coincidences rules out chance and strongly implies design. This is reinforced by the evidence from biology of the incredible complexity of life, particularly the coded information in DNA. This remarkable molecule with its accompanying system of transcription and translation screams for intelligence.

The fact that all people have some sense of right and wrong, even though we may disagree sometimes, tells us we are comparing our morality to some invisible standard outside ourselves that must come from a supreme Law Giver. I am convinced there is a supernatural God.

If this God exists, then has He spoken to man? I quickly tell about the uniqueness of Scripture, written by forty authors

from eight countries over fifteen hundred years in three languages and all with a consistent and unique message of a God of love who ransomed us from our sins. Where we have archaeological evidence it consistently confirms the accuracy of biblical events. I am convinced the Bible is the true and unique Word of God.

The Bible throughout is about Jesus, who repeatedly claimed to be the unique divine Son of God and offered his death and resurrection on behalf of mankind as proof. That Jesus bodily rose from the dead is the only rational conclusion of the evidence of the empty tomb. On top of that, my personal experience of the last thirty-seven years has shown me again and again the unique love and power of God.

So what about you? Why are *you* a Christian?

Notes

1. "LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church," 2007, www.lifeway.com/article/165949/, accessed May 15, 2010.

2. Youth Transition Network has researched this problem over the last ten years and has excellent resources, videos, research, and books and DVDs for purchase. Take a look at www.ytn.org.

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Money Management in a Crisis

The COVID pandemic 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*.[\[1\]](#) 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 Economics*.[\[2\]](#)

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 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{3} 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.

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

Larry Burkett, *How to Manage Your Money: An In-Depth Bible Study on Personal Finances* (Chicago, IL: Moody), 2002.

Jay Richards, *Money, Greed, and God* (NY: Harper One), 2009.

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Your Work Matters to God

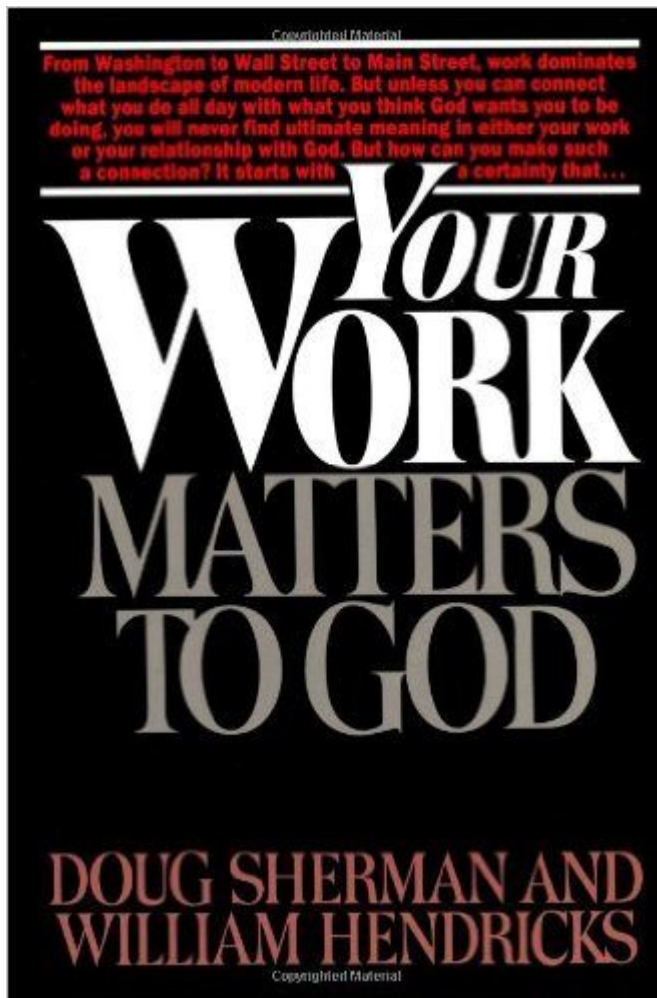
Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.



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

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose

in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.



In their excellent book *Your Work Matters to God*,^{1}



Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Life* when he writes, "Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence."^{2}

First, let's explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other *real* dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you'll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question,

“Who am I, and why am I important?” That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You’re suddenly a “nobody,” and you are not important because you are not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, “What impact will this have on my career?”

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life.^{3} He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.^{4}

Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal

In this article, we’re examining some faulty views of work. One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don’t really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn’t charge them with, “Go and make disciples of all nations which aren’t in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies.” No, He said, “Here’s the garden, now cultivate it.” He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe *only* eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won't last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you're wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother's womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: *time*. It's okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness *now*, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn't eaten in three days! Some needs are temporal, and those needs must be met. So God equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there's everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can

think, “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what others do” (which sets us up for condescension), or “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what I have to do” (which sets us up for false guilt and a sense of “missing it”).

It’s an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we’re making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It’s unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what’s going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn’t lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our *only* priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory.[{5}](#) Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we’ll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!

How God Wants Us to See Work

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here's a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, *as if you were serving the Lord, not men*, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, "I see you. And I appreciate what you're doing." Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world *before* sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God's good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift!{6}

Being happy in our work doesn't depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

Why Work is Good

In this article we're talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God's work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn't contribute to what He doesn't want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God's gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In *Your Work Matters to God*, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people's physical needs. Other jobs meet people's aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, "If one will not work, neither let him eat!"[{7}](#)

3. Through work we meet our family's needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[{8}](#)

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually. [{9}](#)

5. Through work we love God. One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.[{10}](#) We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that's why our work matters to God.

Notes

1. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987.

2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. p. 67.

3. Philippians 1:21

4. Romans 12:1, 2

5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14

6. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, *The Message*.

7. 2 Thess. 3:10

8. 1 Tim. 5:8

9. Leviticus 19:10–Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. Ephesians 4:28–Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Gal 6:6–The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.

10. Matthew 22:37-39

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How to Kill Sin: John Owen's The Mortification of Sin

Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen's classic book The Mortification of Sin.

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an ongoing battle with sin. He suggested I read John Owen's book, *The Mortification of Sin*[{1}](#). I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen's key insights in the battle against sin.



Let's begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, "mort-" or "mors" means death. *Mortificare*—to kill.[{2}](#) Other examples of

this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists “shame” and “humiliation” as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill *sin*. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It’s only appropriate if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don’t sit here and read another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you’re reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and you’re ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you’re still reading, then let’s press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.

What is Mortification?

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill. . .sin.

That's what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That's why this is a big deal. That's why this matters. That's also why sin's presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that "[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death."[3](#)

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before.[4](#) So until then we mortify sin.[5](#)

Now let's talk about mortification. Let's talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen's instruction is clear: "utterly destroy it" or, make it cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.[6](#)

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires," as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The

contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn't merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus' strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let's talk about how not to mortify sin.

How NOT to Mortify Sin

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death.[\[7\]](#)

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.

Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you're tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins

are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year's resolution. You can force the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you've resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it's merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

How to Mortify Sin

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don't it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here's the bad news, though. *You* can't mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don't despair! This doesn't mean you can't experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God's will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something *you* do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh.

Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen's words. "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet." [\[8\]](#)

The way to mortify sin is to set *faith* at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. His sacrifice is your remedy. That's how you kill sin—you don't. You believe in the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It's freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don't. Owen goes on to add two more points of substance. First "fill your soul" with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.

The second point is to *expect* relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ's blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect it's going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who's been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It's a slow and difficult, often *painful* process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don't. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

Conclusion

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don't it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death.

Owen's book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the "soul and substance of all false religion in the world."[{9}](#)

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you're trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

"Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin."[{10}](#) You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus' promise in that struggle: "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."[{11}](#)

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.[{12}](#) He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

Notes

1. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House), 1996.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000.
3. James 1:15.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.
5. Colossians 3:5.
6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
8. Owen, p.161.
9. *Ibid.*, p.23.
10. *Ibid.*, p.161.
11. John 16:33.
12. Psalm 139:14.

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