

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.[\[1\]](#)

In the early 1980s, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar "Campaign for Forgiveness Research" (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness "releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood

pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”[{2}](#)

He’s big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, “The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others.” [{3}](#)

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society’s conflicts, “almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing.”[{4}](#)

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa’s apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film.[{5}](#) I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture.[{6}](#)

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time "to go to my neighbor, to the person that I've wronged." He says he and his compatriots should "climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, 'Look, I'm sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'" [{7}](#)

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow." {8}

Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives. "When we confess our sins," she explained, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever." {9} After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

"A fine message, *Fraulein!*" said the man. "How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. . . . I was a guard there. . . . But since that time . . . I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein.*" He extended his hand again. "Will you forgive me?"

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeance raged inside her, she remembered Jesus' death for this man. How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a "healing warmth" flooding her body. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, "With all my heart."

"And so," Corrie later recalled, "I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on [God's]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

"My Father, the Town Alcoholic"

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms "grudge" and "grudge management" in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt "forgiveness" was a feminine activity, but a "grudge" was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren't family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his mother but despised his father "more than anyone else in the world."[{11}](#) His friends would joke about his dad being drunk. It tore him up inside. "I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family," McDowell relates. "I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I'd go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn't get up, lying in the manure behind the cows." Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, "of a broken heart."

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity's validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus' claims and found it convincing.[{12}](#) He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, "I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: 'Dad, I've become a Christian and . . . I love you.'"

"But how . . . how can you love a father like me?" Josh's dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God's hands. "My dad's life was brand new those last 14 months," recalls Josh. "His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker."

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, "How does all this relate to me personally?" May I offer some suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself*. The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."[{13}](#) Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say

something like this to Him right now:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."[{14}](#) The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronged—or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended should run into each other as each is en route to contact the other.[{15}](#) Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."[{16}](#)

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, loc. cit.
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine*, May/June 2001, 78; <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.
9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.
10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.
11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this

source.

12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.

13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2001, 73;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html>.

Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.

14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.

15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.

16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer

Experimenting With Prayer

We pray for all sorts of reasons. When we've done something wrong, we may unburden our conscience by confessing our sin to God. When we're grateful for some blessing, we may offer up a prayer of thanksgiving. When we're contemplating God's work in creation, we may offer up a prayer of worship or adoration. But one reason that almost all of us pray is to ask God for something. Granted, we may often do this selfishly, or foolishly, or with all manner of wrong motives. But the thing itself, our making requests of God, is a perfectly legitimate thing to do. Indeed, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them (among other things) to make requests, such as "Give us each day our daily bread" (Lk. 11:3).

Although heaven undoubtedly receives millions of requests each day, there's possibly none more common than that which asks God for healing. While I was writing this article, my father was admitted to the critical care unit of a local hospital. Each day, I (along with many other Christians) prayed that he might be healed. But after two weeks, he went to be with the Lord. Naturally, this raises a very serious question. Do our prayers *really* make any difference, or are we just wasting our time?

Recently the *New York Times* ran a story with an intriguing title: "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer".^{1} "Prayers offered by strangers," the story began, "had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery. . . . And patients who knew they were being prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like abnormal heart rhythms." What are we to make of this? Are prayers for healing to no avail? Might they even be counterproductive?

In a fascinating essay titled "The Efficacy of Prayer," C. S. Lewis questioned the value of such experiments. He realized, of course, that one could set up such an experiment and ask people to pray. But he doubted the *wisdom* of it. "You must not try experiments on God, your Master," he wrote. He also observed:

Simply to say prayers is not to pray; otherwise a team of properly trained parrots would serve as well as men for our experiment. . . . You are not doing it in order that suffering should be relieved; you are doing it to find out what happens. The real purpose and the nominal purpose of your prayers are at variance. . . . The experiment demands an impossibility.^{2}

Although on one level such experiments with prayer might be

interesting, nevertheless, for those who have witnessed dramatic answers to their prayers, such studies aren't likely to be *convincing*. But can we know whether or not prayer is *really* effective?

Providence or Coincidence?

A few years ago I was traveling to Kansas to attend a friend's wedding. The sun was just about to set for the evening when I suddenly got a flat tire. I pulled to the side of the road, got out, and prepared to change the flat. I soon realized, however, that this was going to be a bit tricky. Although I had a spare tire, I had no tools to change it!

Now there have been many times when this would have really made me angry. But on this occasion, I simply bowed my head in prayer and asked God for his help. I then sat down on the hood of my car to wait. I was a bit concerned because I knew it would soon be dark. But since there wasn't anything that I could do about *that*, I simply determined to trust the Lord.

In less than a minute, a friendly looking guy with two kids pulled to the side of the road. I explained my situation, and before I fully understood what was happening, he had his tools out and began to change my tire for me. Within about five minutes I was back on the road, praising God for his help in my time of need!

Now understandably, I looked upon this incident as a direct answer to my prayer. But can I really know if this interpretation is correct? Was it *really* God who helped me, in response to my prayer? Or would that man have stopped and changed my tire anyway? Unfortunately, apart from God telling me one way or another, there just doesn't seem to be any way to know for sure.

But I don't think we should be troubled by this. The fact that we can't *prove* a strict causal connection between what we ask

God for in prayer and what actually happens in the world shouldn't really surprise us. After all, we can't *always* prove a causal connection between what we ask our neighbor for and what actually happens! Your neighbor may feed your cat while you're away on vacation because you asked. Then again, "Your neighbor may be a humane person who would not have let your cat starve even if you had forgotten to make any arrangements." {3}

Of course, it may sometimes be possible to prove a causal connection between what I ask my neighbor and what he actually does. But this isn't *always* the case. "Thus in some measure the same doubt that hangs about the causal efficacy of our prayers to God hangs also about our prayers to man. Whatever we get we might have been going to get anyway." {4} On the other hand, the Bible also assures us that sometimes we don't have because we don't ask (James 4:2). So in the end, we may just have to learn to live with a bit of mystery about our prayers.

Whatever We Ask?

The most radical promises about prayer found anywhere in Scripture occur on the lips of Jesus. The nature of these promises is nothing short of staggering. Just listen to what Jesus tells his disciples: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Or again, "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23).

What are we to do with such incredible promises? On the surface, Jesus seems to be saying that he or the Father will do *whatever* the disciples ask. But is this *really* what Jesus meant? If so, it seems to raise a very serious problem. After all, do we *always* get what we ask for? And would it really be good if we did?

If my own experience can be trusted, then it seems to me that Christian philosopher William Lane Craig is quite correct when he writes, "If we are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, every one of us knows that sometimes God does not answer our prayers."[{5}](#) Indeed, he continues, sometimes God "*cannot* answer our prayers because Christians are praying for contradictory things."[{6}](#) He asks us to imagine "two Christian athletes playing on opposite sides in the Super Bowl Each would naturally be disposed to pray that his team would win, and yet both prayers could not be answered, for the two athletes would be praying for contradictory results."[{7}](#)

In addition, it's not very hard to think of examples in which it might be *unwise* for God to give us whatever we ask. After all, finite and fallible human beings are often inclined to ask God for rather foolish things. It wouldn't always be best for God to give us whatever we requested. For example, suppose a godly young man who desperately wants to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary is praying that God will grant him a particular young lady to be his wife. But suppose that this young lady has a passion to serve the Lord here in some way. Finally, suppose that they would both be miserable and spiritually unproductive if they married each other, but they would both be deeply satisfied and productive in the work of the Lord if they each married someone else. Would it really be wise for God to grant this young man's request? It sure doesn't seem like it. Sometimes, as Garth Brooks observed, we can all thank God for unanswered prayers!

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 1

But if all this is so, then what's become of Jesus' radical promise to do whatever we ask in his name? It seems to me, quite simply, that Jesus' promise must be qualified somehow. But is it really wise to tamper with Scripture this way?

Let me suggest two responses to this. First, I think that when his words are properly interpreted, Jesus himself qualifies

his promises right from the start. Second, the other qualifications I will mention are all firmly rooted in the Scriptures. In other words, we won't be tampering with the Bible. We'll rather be looking at its teachings to see if there are any qualifications expressed elsewhere in its pages that might qualify Jesus' promises in some way.

But let's go back to that first point. Notice what Jesus says in John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father." Immediately we see that Jesus hasn't really given a blanket promise to do whatever we ask. Rather, he's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask *in his name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father*.

What does it mean to ask for something *in Jesus' name*? Many people treat this phrase as something akin to a magical formula. By saying the right words, in the proper sequence, they think that God is somehow obligated to give them what they've asked for. But this is certainly *not* what Jesus had in mind! Instead, to pray for something *in Jesus' name* is to pray for something that's consistent with the *character* and *purposes* of Christ in the world. As Merrill Tenney observes, "In prayer we call on him to work out his purpose, not simply to gratify our whims. The answer is promised so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."[{8}](#) So when Jesus promises to do whatever we ask *in his name*, He's not promising to do whatever we ask—period! He's qualified his promise to do whatever we ask that's consistent with his *character* and *purposes* in the world.

But there's more. As we search the Scriptures we find yet other principles that appear to qualify Jesus' promise. Dr. Craig mentions several of these in his book *Hard Questions, Real Answers*.[{9}](#) For instance, our requests might be denied because of unconfessed sin in our lives. The psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). Further, our requests might also be

denied if they arise from impure motives. James states quite pointedly, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives” (4:3).

Qualifying Christ’s Promises, Pt. 2

What are some more reasons why our requests to God might sometimes be denied?

First, our prayers may sometimes not be granted because of our lack of faith. Jesus told his disciples, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mk. 11:24). This verse makes it clear that the Lord expects our prayers to be joined with faith in his ability to grant them.

Second, as William Lane Craig observes, “Sometimes our prayers are not answered because, quite frankly, we don’t really care whether they are.”^{10} This was certainly *not* the pattern of the great prayers recorded in Scripture. Consider the example of Hannah, who prayed out of “great anguish and grief” for a son (1 Sam. 1:16). Or Daniel, who upon learning from the writings of Jeremiah the prophet “that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years . . . turned to the Lord . . . and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (Dan. 9:2-3). If we’re honest, many of us would probably have to admit that our own prayers are often just a pale reflection of the earnest examples we find in Scripture.

So too with perseverance in prayer. We tend to give up far too quickly and easily. Apparently, things weren’t much different in Jesus’ day. Indeed, he told his disciples the parable of the persistent widow “to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).

These are a few more reasons why our prayers to God might not be granted. But what if none of these reasons applies in our

case? What if we've confessed all known sin, our motives are pure, and we've prayed earnestly, with perseverance, and in faith, and still our heartfelt requests to God are denied? What should we conclude then? That God doesn't really care? Or that he doesn't even exist?

Although we might be tempted to doubt God in such times, it's important to remember one last qualification that the Bible puts on our requests to God; namely, they must be consistent with his will. The apostle John wrote that "if we ask anything according to his will . . . we have what we asked of him" (1 Jn. 5:14-15). But sometimes our requests to God just aren't consistent with his will. In cases like these, although it may not be easy, we need to trust that our loving heavenly Father really does know what's best and that he can be counted on to do it. In other words, we may not always know his mind, but we can always trust his heart.

Notes

1. Benedict Carey, "Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2006, <http://nyti.ms/advuuY>.
2. C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), 6.
3. Ibid.
4. *ibid.*, 7.
5. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 43.
6. Ibid.
7. *Ibid.*, 44.
8. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:146.
9. The remainder of this discussion is much indebted to William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 47-55.
10. *Ibid.*, 49.

Grief and Grace

Former Probe staffer Rick Rood, a hospital chaplain who understands the pain of losing his beloved wife, addresses loss, grieving and God's grace.

Over the past eight years that I've had the privilege of serving in the hospitals, I've had the occasion and privilege of interacting with thousands of grieving people, and to become more than casually acquainted with the many aspects of the "grieving process." In seeking to become better able to comfort those who are grieving, I've read many books and attended numerous seminars. But I've observed that while it's one thing to learn about the grieving process, it's quite another to experience it. Australian pastor Donald Howard wrote in the preface to his short book entitled *Christians Grieve Too* that though he was prepared for the death of his wife from cancer at the age of forty-six, he was "ill-prepared for grief."

Part of me didn't want to write this short essay. I've gotten in the habit of writing about some of the painful things in life the past year or so (though from the perspective of faith). And I wanted to write something happy, or even humorous. But I guess it's one of the occupational hazards of a hospital chaplain that you are constantly confronted with the realities of life that most of us would rather forget about (until it's no longer possible). This past year, I didn't have to go to the hospital to be confronted with this kind of reality. So, please bear with me as I "reflect" one last time.

One of the things I've noticed about grieving people is that though all people do grieve their losses, everyone grieves differently. There must be a host of factors influencing how people grieve: the kind of relationship they had with the loved one, and its depth, the degree of dependence of one on the other (either the dependence of the survivor on the deceased, or vice versa), the presence of ambivalence in the relationship (the presence of anger as well as love), the degree of guilt (whether real or imagined) experienced by the survivor, the kind of loss (sudden, traumatic, preventable, etc.), the person's temperament and personality, gender, ethnicity, family background, past losses and accumulated grief, one's world view and spirituality. Wow. That's just the short list! Knowing just this much has kept me from comparing how one person grieves from another, and from making judgments about things I know little or nothing about.

There are many excellent books and resources available on grief and loss these days, quite a number from a Christian perspective. But few of them take into consideration in much detail what the scriptures tell us about grief, except for some passing references. My work and my own personal experience have prompted me to pay more attention to this topic in my Bible reading than I normally would. And especially this past year I have tried to listen more closely to what the Lord says to us about it through his Word. Some of what I've found so far has surprised me. All of it has encouraged me.

Grief and Loss

This first section will of necessity be a bit more somber. But it is a necessary prelude to what will follow! The first and most obvious thing one notices in reading the scriptures is that death follows sin, like winter follows fall. God had warned that Adam's sin would result in death (Genesis 2:17). And it did. The solemn refrain "and he died" appears eight

times in the list of Adam's descendants given in Genesis 5. Death is indeed the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23a). Death is not (as we are sometimes told) "a natural thing" or "just a part of life." Death was not part of the created order when God pronounced it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). It is an aberration, an alien invader into God's natural order. Isaiah describes death as a "covering which is over all peoples," and a "veil which is stretched over all nations" (Isaiah 25:7). It is the great equalizer.

The second most obvious thing one notices is that God promises that death will one day be destroyed. The day is coming when "He will swallow up death for all time" (Isaiah 25:8), when the sentence of death will be "abolished" (1 Corinthians 15:26), and it will "no longer be" (Revelation 21:4). For all who are in Christ, this is our great hope!

The third thing that becomes apparent as one reads the scriptures is that while the sentence on death awaits its fulfillment, sorrow and grief follow death and loss as naturally as spring follows winter. If death were just a natural thing, it would be unnatural to grieve the resulting loss. But since death and loss are not natural, grief and sorrow *are*. They are the expression of pain resulting from the severing of relational bonds that were originally designed by God to be permanent. But because of sin and death, they no longer are. And it hurts.

It's interesting that the first person described in the Bible as grieving is God! Scripture tell us that because of the evil and wickedness of man. God was "grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:6). We don't understand everything about the emotional life of God. It is certainly not exactly like our own. But since we are created in his image, we should not be surprised to learn that our emotions are in some sense a reflection of his own. One of the most remarkable statements of scripture in this regard appears in Isaiah 63:9, "In all their affliction, he was afflicted." Edward J. Young, in his commentary on Isaiah

(vol 3, p. 481) says, "God feels the sufferings of his people as his own sufferings." In fact, every member of the Godhead is described in scripture as experiencing grief. Not only God the Father, as in these passages, but also God the Son. In reflecting on his rejection by the nation's leaders in Jerusalem, it is said that He "wept over it" (Luke 19:41). At the tomb of his friend Lazarus He "was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled," and indeed that he "wept" (John 11:33, 35). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is described as pouring out His heart to God the Father "with loud crying and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). The Holy Spirit is described as experiencing grief as well. Compare Isaiah 63:10 and Ephesians 4:30, where we are warned against "grieving the Holy Spirit" by our sins. The psalmist says that God "remembers" our tears (Psalm 56:8). And it is even implied that He is in some sense moved by them (Isaiah 38:5, "I have heard your prayers, I have seen your tears").

The fact that God experiences grief should not be seen as contradicting his sovereign control over all things. For it is clear that there are many things within God's sovereign purpose that are nonetheless grievous to Him. In fact, there are many things within God's purpose that are the cause of His anger and judgment.

If God, then, experiences grief, it should not surprise us to find many scriptures which describe God's people as experiencing grief as well. Abraham is said to have "mourned and wept" over the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2). So Joseph at the death of his father Jacob (Genesis 50:1). The nation Israel at the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:8). Indeed, there is an entire book devoted to expressing the "Lamentations" of the nation Israel over the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. True, God's people were admonished not to mourn in the same way that the surrounding pagan nations did at the death of their own. Though we do not understand today the meaning of these practices, the Jews were forbidden to "cut

themselves" or "shave their head" for the sake of the dead, as their pagan neighbors did (Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1). Nonetheless, there were traditional mourning practices among the Jews that were viewed as entirely appropriate (e.g., the covering of the head in 2 Sam 15:30, the baring of the feet in Isaiah 20:2, and the covering of the lip in Leviticus 13:45 and Micah 3:7.) The fact that Ezekiel was forbidden these outward expressions of mourning at the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:16-17) as a sign to the nation concerning their impending judgment (v. 24), indicates that such restraint was not considered normal.

In the New Testament we find similar expressions of grief on the part of God's people. We've already noticed our Lord's own grief. Indeed he was called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3, cf. v. 10a). A curious description, if indeed Jesus rarely wept. One aspect of our growth in likeness to Christ is that we should be growing more transparent about our emotions, and more empathetic with those of others. We should also note the description of the "devout men" who when they buried the martyred Stephen "made loud lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). A most interesting reference appears in Paul's letter to the Philippians (a letter devoted to promoting the joy of the Lord), where he states that should his friend Epaphroditus have died as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow" (2:27). Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people have reason not to "grieve as those who have no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13). But there is nothing in the New Testament which suggests that God's people nonetheless do not or should not grieve the temporary loss of relationship with those they love. Theologian J. I. Packer has stated: "Grief is the human system reacting to the pain of loss, and as such it is an inescapable reaction" (*A Grief Sanctified*, p. 12).

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the removal of grief and sorrow from human experience is tied very closely in

scripture with the ultimate removal of death and loss. Compare the following statements from both Old and New Testaments. "He will swallow up *death* for all time, and the Lord God will wipe *tears* away from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8). "And He will wipe away every *tear* from their eyes; and there will no longer be any *death*" (Revelation 21:4). Though I believe (as we shall shortly see) there is substantial healing available from the Lord in our grieving now, its effects will not be entirely and completely relieved until the old order of life is fully replaced by the new.

With this context in mind, before moving on to a consideration of God's comforting grace, there is an intriguing passage in the Old Testament that we ought not overlook. It's found in the sometimes enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, *for when a face is sad a heart may be happy*. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure" (7:2-4 NASB). As with many of Solomon's sayings in this book, the italicized phrase is not easily understood. But the RSV rendering seems to capture its meaning well when it says, "By sadness of countenance the heart is made glad." Or as the NKJV puts it, "For by a sad countenance the heart is made better." What the writer appears to be saying is that genuine "recovery" from grief comes not by denying it or repressing it, but by giving appropriate expression to it. This is obviously something that the Old Testament saints understood, and practiced. And so may we. Someone well may ask how sorrow and grief can be consistent with the joy of the Lord. But it is interesting that St. Paul saw no contradiction in describing himself on one occasion as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10a). The former is the result of experiencing painful loss; the latter the result of contemplating the implications of the providence of God—simultaneously.

Few people have experienced losses greater than those that befell Job. Perhaps his initial response to news of the death of his children provides something of a paradigm for us. "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20). Grieving, but worshiping. Grieving profoundly. Worshiping humbly.

Comfort and Grace

In God's economy, if grief follows loss, then comfort follows grief. And this is exactly what we find in many passages of scripture. Among the things for which the Lord is said to have anointed his Messiah is "To comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah. 61:2b). Among those upon whom Jesus pronounced God's blessing are those who mourn, "for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). A fact sometimes overlooked is that it is only those who mourn, who acknowledge their grief, who place themselves in a position of being comforted by the Lord. God's comforting grace is the answer to our grieving heart.

One of the most endearing descriptions of the Lord in scripture is found in 2 Corinthians 1:3, "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He is merciful and compassionate in nature. And He is the source of all genuine comfort and encouragement. The word used here for "comfort" is related to the word used to denote the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter" ... one called alongside to encourage and help (John 14:16,26). He is "the divine fount of all consolation to His people—the 'all' both excluding any other source of comfort and also emphasizing the complete adequacy of that comfort for every circumstance that may arise" (P. E. Hughes, *II Corinthians*, p. 13). The following verse states that God "comforts us in all our affliction" (v. 4a). "The present tense of the verb shows that this God of ours comforts us constantly and unfliningly, not spasmodically and intermittently; and he does so in all our affliction, not just in certain kinds of affliction" (Hughes, p. 12). Furthermore,

God comforts us “so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (v. 4b). “Nor is the comfort received from God intended to terminate in the recipient: it has a further purpose, namely, to fit the Christian for the God-like ministry of comforting and encouraging others, whatever the affliction they may be suffering” (Hughes, p. 12). What a rich description of the comforting grace of God! From Him. To us. Through us.

But *how* does God’s comfort come to us? One means through which God’s comfort comes to us has been alluded to already. And that is that God identifies with us in our grief. We have noted above some of the passages that state this very fact. He “sympathizes with our weakness” (Heb. 4:15). “For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Psalm 103:14).

But beyond this, God has provided his word with a view to providing comfort in time of sorrow. “This is my *comfort* in my affliction, that your word has revived me” (Psalm 119:50). “My soul weeps because of grief; *strengthen* me according to your word” (Psalm 119:28). God’s words seem to find their way into our heart particularly when they are set to music: “Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Psalm 119:54). I have found great comfort in the music of praise and worship to the Lord. St. Paul says that “through perseverance and the *encouragement* of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). And concerning his teaching on our coming reunion with the Lord and with our departed loved ones, St. Paul says, “Therefore *comfort* one another with these words.” It is in part through letting the word of God “richly dwell within” us (Colossians 3:16) that we can gain access to God’s comforting grace. I have found it true in my own experience that the Word of God has been a river of grace to my heart.

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts of God in our life. “O may your lovingkindness comfort me,

according to your word to your servant (Psalm 119:76).” It is for the direct experience of the faithful love of God that the psalmist is praying here. And I believe God does comfort and encourage us by leaving his “fingerprints” on our lives in many ways during our days of grieving. He lets us know through his providential acts that we are not alone. That He is with us. That He loves us. That He has a purpose for us still (cf. Genesis 50:24).

As indicated in the passage examined above (2 Corinthians 1), much of God’s comfort comes to us through his people. Later in this very letter, Paul tells us that he was comforted by God’s sending his friend Titus. “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Corinthians 7:6). When God provided Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, it is said that he “was comforted after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote that he was “refreshed” by his friend Onesiphorus who searched for him and found him (2 Timothy 1:16-17). It is often overlooked that much of God’s grace comes to us, not only directly from His Spirit or through His word, but through His people. Peter tells us that it is as we steward the gifts God has given us in serving one another that we administer “the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). The Old Testament people of God seemed to put this understanding into practice in a very practical way. It was apparently their custom to surround their grieving neighbors with love and support by providing meals for them. The “bread of mourning” and “cup of consolation” were biblical terms meant to be taken in a very literal way (cf. Deuteronomy 26:14; Jeremiah 16:7; Hosea 9:4).

In what ways can God’s people administer God’s comforting grace? Certainly through following Jesus’ example to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15b; contra Proverbs 25:20). By learning to be comfortable and patient with those who are actively grieving their losses. By learning to be “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19b). By being a “ready

listener.” I’ve personally found that those who have simply “listened to my story” have greatly comforted me. I once heard a pastor speak of this effect as “healing through the laying on of ears.” What a great phrase! When Job’s friends first came “to sympathize with him and comfort him” (2:11b), it is said that “they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great” (2:13). (Oh that they would have remained in silent mode!) Later, Job made this telling statement: “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty” (6:14). The thought is that lack of kindness can serve only to push people further from God when they are despairing. I’ve talked with many people in the hospital through the years who have distanced themselves from various churches. When I’ve inquired about what occasioned their departure, too often I have been told that it was during a time of bereavement. You can fill in the rest of the story. One way I’ve learned that we “speak the truth in love” is by being sensitive to the recipient’s present ability to receive it and absorb it. (“I have many more things to say to you, *but you cannot bear them now*”, John 16:12.)

Closing Thoughts

A rather obscure passage that has served to guide me in all of this is found in 1 Samuel 30:1-6.

“Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire; and they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing anyone, and carried them off and went their way. When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with *him lifted*

their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep. Now David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God."

What a great passage for summing up our thoughts in this article. We see first the experience of sudden loss. Then the expression of understandable sorrow and grief. They wept 'til there was no more strength in them to weep. But then, as he was able, *David strengthened himself in the Lord.*

It's that last phrase that I want to emphasize in closing. And there are two thoughts that emerge from it. First, the strength to move through our grief comes from the Lord. We go astray when we seek to find comfort for our grief apart from Him. I've seen many in the hospitals who have fallen into addictions or into unhealthy relationships due to their attempts to find comfort apart from the Lord. We've seen already some of the ways in which the Lord comforts and strengthens us in our grief, so that we can move on with our life and fulfill God's remaining purposes for us.

But second, as David did, we ourselves must take responsibility for obtaining God's comfort and strength. *David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.* Gaining God's comfort involves our active participation in the process. And if the people around us seem not to be helping us in this direction, then we must ask God to lead us to those who will. And seek them out. Not everyone is so equipped. A dear friend who had previously lost his wife told me, a good while before [I lost Polly](#), "Rick, your recovery will be your responsibility."

The rate of recovery is unique for every person. But there is at least one passage in scripture which speaks of those who

seemed to be stuck in their grief, “refusing to be comforted” (Jeremiah 31:15; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:7), in need of “restraining their eyes from tears” (Jeremiah 31:16), and of remembering that “there is a hope for (their) future” (Jeremiah 31:17). We do this as we utilize the means of grace which God provides, placing our faith in Him one day at a time, in pursuit of his purpose for the remainder of our days. Part of that purpose may be (probably will be) serving others who are still on the path of grief.

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).

Suggested reading:

Howard, Donald. *Christians Grieve Too*. The Banner of Truth Trust.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. Bantam Books.

Mitsch, Raymond R. and Lynn Brookside. *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*. Vine Books.

Packer, J. I. *A Grief Sanctified*. Vine Books.

Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. Zondervan.

Wright, H. Norman. *Helping Those Who Hurt*. Bethany House.

Wright, H. Norman. *Recovering from the Losses of Life*. Revell.

Wright, H. Norman. *Will My Life Ever Be the Same? Finding God's Strength to Hope Again*. Harvest House.

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Making Moral Choices – From A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson addresses making moral choices using the Bible and biblical principles, using both philosophical and practical approaches.

Love and Biblical Morality

✘ A Christian view of morality is based upon the assumption that God exists and has revealed Himself to the human race. He has chosen to reveal Himself in nature (Psalm 19, Romans 1) and in human conscience (Romans 2:14-15). He has also revealed Himself through the Bible (Psalm 119, 2 Timothy 3:16) and in the person of Jesus Christ (John 10:30, Hebrews 1:1-4).

God's character is the ultimate standard of right and wrong. And even though the Bible was written long before the development of genetic engineering or modern media, it nevertheless provides principles that can be used to evaluate the morality of social, scientific, and technological issues.

Biblical morality can be developed from learning to live God's way according to biblical principles. Though the Christian life is much more than a set of rules or principles, these principles do provide moral boundaries for behavior.

Biblical morality is also based upon love that has its source in God. Jesus was asked by the teachers of the law which was the most important commandment. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

The two most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. Essentially all biblical principles rest upon this foundation. And these principles can be found in God’s revelation in the Bible. God’s character as expressed in God’s Word should be diligently applied to every area of life.

Jesus also taught Christians to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44-45): “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” As his opening phrase suggests, this was not the common practice of the day. In fact, it was completely contrary to the concept of love practiced in that day or even in our day.

The apostle Paul teaches that love is “the law of Christ” and thereby supreme and sufficient (Galatians 5:14; 6:2). He also teaches that love is the foundation of Christian obedience. Even if we manifest the gifts of the Spirit and do good works, they do not profit us unless they are done in love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

He also teaches that God shows His love to us in that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8) and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 6:37-39). And this is not just a theological truth, but the “love of Christ controls us” (2 Corinthians 5:14) and provides us with an ability to live the Christian life.

Knowing God’s Will

How do we make proper moral choices based upon biblical principles? The Bible does provide biblical guidelines on a vast array of issues. Christians also have the liberty to make

individual moral choices in areas of moral neutrality. Ultimately, making moral choices involves discerning the will of God in one's life.

Whole books have been written on how we can know the will of God, but we can summarize a few key principles here.

First, we can know God's will through the Bible. Before considering any other way to discern God's will, one should ask whether the Bible has already provided guidance in this area. The Bible is full of God's specific commands and principles.

A teenager doesn't have to ask if he should get drunk; the Bible has already addressed that issue (Ephesians 5:18). An unmarried couple doesn't need to ask if they should live together before they marry. Again, the Bible has addressed the topic (1 Corinthians 6:18).

The Bible provides boundaries and barriers to our moral actions. We are to stay within those moral boundaries. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:6), told them "Do not go beyond what is written."

A second way we discern God's will is through prayer. We are commanded to bring our requests before God. In Philippians 4:6 we are told: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

If we are earnestly reading the Bible and seeking God's will, He will reveal it to us, often through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We read in Romans 8:27 that "The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

A third way we discern God's will is through our conscience. If our conscience is troubling us about a particular action or behavior, then we should refrain from that activity. Paul says that each person "must be fully convinced in his own mind"

(Romans 14:5). He adds that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

The opposite is not necessarily true. In other words, conscience is a good stop sign but not a green light. A troubled conscience is sufficient justification to refrain, and a guilty conscience is reason enough to stop a particular action or behavior.

A clear conscience is no justification for proceeding. The Bible teaches that, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). We can easily deceive ourselves into sin.

Christians should strive to have a good conscience before God and man (Acts 24:16). A troubled conscience is reason to avoid an action, but a clear conscience may not be sufficient justification to proceed.

Christian Liberty

What about times when the Bible does not clearly seem to speak to a particular action? These areas of moral neutrality are still governed by biblical principles that guide our Christian liberty.

Even though a particular action may not be prohibited in Scripture, it still may be offensive to others because of their social, ethnic, or religious background. Another person’s family background or spiritual maturity is also a consideration Christians must make.

The Apostle Paul articulates the principles guiding our liberty in Romans 14-15. The specific example that he uses involves the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. While this issue is of no moral concern today, it does provide key biblical principles which we can apply in determining our response to issues not specifically addressed in the Bible.

The first principle is that Christians are not to have a judgmental attitude toward one another in regard to issues that are morally neutral. Paul says in Romans 14:3 that the “one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat” nor should the “one who does not eat . . . judge the one who eats.” In other words, whether you participate in or refrain from a morally neutral activity, you should not be judgmental of the other person.

No one has the right to force their moral conclusions on others when the Bible does not provide clear principles on the matter. Paul asks in Romans 14:4, “Who are you to judge the servant of another?” Christians are instructed to decide these matters for themselves as they consult the Bible and their conscience.

Second, each Christian must decide what is right or wrong for him or her. Paul teaches that if you believe a particular action to be wrong for you, then it is wrong. He says in Romans 14:4, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

He taught that all things were clean. In other words, there was no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols (it was morally neutral). But he also teaches that if a person believes it is sinful to indulge in a practice, then it is indeed sinful for them.

Each person “must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). If there is doubt, then it is better to refrain from participating rather than engaging in what has become a sinful action for the person. Doubt or uncertainty is a sufficient reason to refrain from a particular activity or behavior.

A key test of Christian obedience is whether a person can do so “for the Lord” (Romans 14:6). Christians are to “live for the Lord” because “we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). If one

cannot participate in an activity while serving the Lord, then he or she should refrain. Paul says that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

A third principle is whether a morally neutral activity would be “an obstacle or a stumbling block” to another believer (Romans 14:13). Christians should be aware of their actions on the Christian walk of others around them. While we may have liberty in Christ to participate in an action or behavior, another believer might be offended or adversely affected by what we do.

Paul teaches that we have a moral responsibility to other believers. He says, “we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength” (Romans 15:1). In order to do so we may have to limit our Christian liberty.

At the same time there is a balance between enjoying our liberty in Christ and trying not to give offense. If one believes he or she can participate in an activity, then one should do so with that firm “conviction before God” (Romans 14:22). But it would be wise not to participate publicly but privately for the sake of a believer who might be hurt by one’s actions (Romans 14:15).

A final principle is how a particular action or behavior will affect the individual believer’s walk with the Lord. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 that; “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”

Although these morally neutral practices are lawful, they may not be profitable and could actually master (or enslave) a person. There is nothing in the Bible about such things as poor nutrition, addiction to caffeine, or watching lots of television, yet most would agree that such behaviors are not profitable. In fact, they are frequently debilitating to the individual. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that

whether “you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Honesty and Biblical Morality

Although the Bible admonishes us to be honest and to tell the truth, honesty seems to be at an all-time low. One study of high school students found that 71 percent of them admitted to cheating on an exam at least once in the last twelve months. And 92 percent of them said they lied to their parents in the last twelve months while 79 percent said they did so two or more times. So what does the Bible say about honesty and truth?

The Old Testament calls upon the people of God to deal honestly with one another. Leviticus 9:35 says “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity.” Likewise, Proverbs 11:1 warns that “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord.” Believers are to use honest weights and be honest in their dealings with others.

A righteous person does not “take a bribe against the innocent” (Psalm 15:5). Isaiah (5:23) pronounces judgment on those “who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right.”

The New Testament admonishes Christians to “have a good conscience” and desire to conduct themselves “honorably in all things” (Hebrews. 13:18). Paul said he attempted to always maintain “a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). Christians should “have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Honesty also requires telling the truth. The Ten Commandments forbids both the swearing of false oaths and the bearing of false testimony (Exodus 20:7, 16; Deuteronomy 5:11, 20; cf. Leviticus 19:12; Jeremiah 7:9). In the Old Testament, false

witnesses were to suffer the same punishment that they had hoped to inflict upon the others (Deuteronomy 19:16-21).

Telling the truth also involved more than false testimony in a court. Believers are not to spread false reports (Proverbs 12:17; 14:5, 25) or report the truth maliciously or engage in slander (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 26:20).

Speaking evil is prohibited (Psalm 34:13; Proverbs 24:28; Ephesians 4:31; James 4:11; 1 Peter 3:10), and it disqualifies a person from God's favor (Psalm 15:3) and from a leadership position in the church (1 Timothy 3:8; Titus 2:3).

In the Old Testament, oaths and vows were used many times. Abraham (Genesis 21:22-34), Jacob (Genesis 25:33; 28:20), Joseph (Genesis 50:5), Joshua (Joshua 6:26), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11), Saul (1 Samuel 14:24), David (1 Samuel 20:17), Ezra (Ezra 10:5), and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:25) all swore oaths or vows. The swearing of these oaths and vows underscores the seriousness of telling the truth and following up on one's commitment.

We need truth telling today like never before. Perhaps the greatest battle in society today is a battle over truth. Voters are skeptical of politicians. Proponents of various biomedical procedures (abortion, cloning) often redefine terms and mislead the public about the true nature of the procedures they advocate. We need Christians to set an example by being honest and telling the truth.

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Myths Christians Believe – False Beliefs Exposed

Sue Bohlin identifies and examines some common false beliefs held by many Christians. These beliefs, which are countered by biblical scripture, range from considerations of angels to heaven to salvation to “God helps those who help themselves.”

Angels, Good and Bad

In this article we examine some of the myths Christians believe.

There are lots of misconceptions about angels and devils that come from non-biblical sources ranging from great literature to films to the comic strips in our newspaper.

One myth about angels is that when a loved one dies, he or she becomes our guardian angel. While that can be a comforting thought, that's not what Scripture says. God created angels before He created the physical universe; because we know they sang together in worship and shouted for joy at the creation (Job 38:7). When believing loved ones die, they stay human, but they become better than they ever were on earth, and better than the angels. No angel was ever indwelt by God Himself, as Christians are!

An even greater myth that many people believe is the image of Satan as an ugly red creature with pitchfork, horns, and a tail who gladly reigns in hell. For this misconception we have several authors to thank, mainly the 13th century work of Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, written in the 1700s. The biblical image of Satan is of an angel who has fallen to irredeemable evil and depravity but yet can transform himself into a beautiful angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:14) He can make himself appear winsome, which is why people

can be attracted to the occult. But Satan is not the king of hell. Jesus disarmed him at the Cross, made a public spectacle of him and the rest of the demons, and made him into a defeated foe destined for an eternity of torment in the lake of fire. (Col. 2:15, Rev. 20:10)

Another misconception about Satan that many people believe is that he is the evil counterpart to God. In C.S. Lewis' preface to the Screwtape Letters, he answers the question of whether he believes in "the Devil":

Now, if by 'the Devil' you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly No. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a "perfect badness" opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will, memory, energy, and existence itself) there would be none of him left.

If I Do Everything Right, Life Will Work Smoothly.

A very common myth that many Christians believe is, "If I do everything right, life will work smoothly." We seem to be immersed in an attitude of entitlement, believing that God owes us an easy and comfortable life if we serve Him. We expect to be able to avoid all pain, and we look for formulas to make life work. Frankly, many of us are addicted to our own comfort zones, and when anything disturbs our comfort zone, we feel betrayed and abandoned by God.

So when life doesn't go so smoothly, we often jump to one of two conclusions. Either we must be sinning, or God is out to get us. The book of Job draws back the curtain on the unseen drama in the heavenlies and shows us that when problems come, it doesn't have to be one of these two options. Sometimes

things are going on behind the scenes in the heavenly realm that have nothing to do with our sin. And since God is totally good, it's a lie from the pit of hell that when bad things happen, God is out to get us in some kind of cosmic sadistic power play.

Even when we do everything right—although NOBODY does everything right, not even the holiest, most disciplined people—things can go wrong. The Bible gives us insight into why it might be happening. First, we live in a fallen world, where bad stuff happens because that's the consequence of sin. This includes natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes and floods, and includes moral disasters like divorce and abuse and murder.

Secondly, we live in a spiritual battle zone. Unseen demonic enemies attack us with spiritual warfare. God has provided spiritual armor, described in Ephesians 6, but if we don't put it on, His armor can't protect us.

Third, we have an inaccurate view of suffering. We think that if we're suffering, something is wrong and needs to be fixed. But 1 Peter 4:19 says that some people suffer according to the will of God. That doesn't sound very nice, but that's because we often think the most important thing in life is avoiding pain. But God isn't committed to keeping us comfortable, He's creating a Bride for His Son who needs to shine with character and perseverance and maturity.

The Lord Jesus promised that we would have tribulation in this world. (John 16:33) The word for tribulation means pressure; it means we get squeezed in by trouble. Jesus said that in the world we would have pressure, but in Him we have peace. Life won't always work smoothly, no matter how well we live, but we always have the presence and power of God Himself to take us through it.

God Won't Give Me More Than I Can Handle.

People get baffled and angry when bad things happen, and it just gets worse when God doesn't make the difficult situation go away. We start wondering if God has gone on vacation because we're nearing our breaking point and God isn't stepping in to make things better.

The problem with this myth is that God is in the business of breaking His people so that we will get to the point of complete dependence on Him.^{1} Brokenness is a virtue, not something to be protected from. When the apostle Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn in the flesh, God said no. Instead, He responded with an amazing promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul realized that his weakness was the very key to experiencing God's strength and not his own.

One of my friends ministered as a chaplain at Ground Zero in New York after the Sept. 11 attacks. She got so tired and exhausted that she knew it was more than she could bear. That's when she discovered that her exhaustion took her out of God's way and He could shine through her, ministering with His strength through her profound weakness.

I love this definition of brokenness: "Brokenness is that place where we realize that all the things we counted on to make life work, don't."^{2} God makes life work. Formulas don't. Our own efforts don't. Trustful dependence on Him plugs us into the power source for life. And that often happens when we've crossed over the line of what we can handle on our own.

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.

This myth has been repeated so many times that many people think it's in Scripture. It's not. In fact, the truth is exactly the opposite. A heart full of self-dependence and self-reliance says to God, "I don't need You, I can do it

myself. I can handle life without You.” God honors our choices and the exercise of our will; He doesn’t push His help on us. He waits for us to ask for it. He can’t help those who help themselves because we’re too busy *doing* to receive His strength and His help. It’s like the way you can’t fill a cup with coffee when it’s already full of tea. Jesus said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) But that doesn’t stop lots of us from trying! The truth is, God doesn’t help those who help themselves; God helps the helpless.

Two Myths About Heaven

The first myth is perpetuated by the many jokes and comics about St. Peter at the pearly gates. Many people believe that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, St. Peter will let us into heaven. It doesn’t work that way.

God has one standard for getting into heaven: absolute perfection and holiness. The person who has sinned the smallest sin is still guilty and cannot be perfect and holy. It’s like a balloon: once it’s popped, there’s nothing anyone can do to make it whole again. Only one Person has ever qualified for heaven by being perfect and holy—the Lord Jesus. When we trust Christ as our Savior, He does two things for us: He pays the penalty for our sin, which keeps us out of hell, and He exchanges our sin for His righteousness, which allows us into heaven.

Another myth is that heaven is like a big socialist state where everybody gets a standard issue harp and halo and we all sit around on clouds all day praising God in a never-ending church service. Doesn’t sound all that great, does it?

Fortunately, heaven’s a whole lot better than that. For one thing, the reason we think worshiping God for all eternity is boring is because we don’t know God as He really is. We’re like the six-year-old boy who declared that “girls are stupid, and kissin’ ’em is even stupider.” Kids don’t have a clue how

great love can be, and we don't have a clue how wonderful God is.

Heaven is no socialist state. There will be varying degrees of reward and responsibility in heaven, depending on the way we lived our life on earth. All believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, when God will test our works by passing them through the fire of motive. If we did things in His strength and for His glory, they will pass through the refining fire and emerge as gold, silver and costly stones. If we did things in our own flesh and for our glory or for the earthly payoff, we will have gotten all our strokes on earth, and our works will be burned up, not making it through the testing "fire."

There are different types of rewards in heaven: a prophet's reward, a righteous man's reward, and a disciple's reward. Some will receive the crown of life, or a martyr's crown, and there's also the crown of righteousness. Our lives in heaven will be determined by the choices, sacrifices, and actions of earth. Some will be very wealthy, and others will be "barely there." You can check our Web site for the scriptures about this. [{3}](#)

Myths About the Bible and Salvation

Many non-Christians believe a myth that is accepted by a lot of Christians as well—that the Bible has been changed and corrupted since it was written. The historical evidence actually makes a rather astounding case for the supernatural protection and preservation of both Old and New Testaments.

As soon as the New Testament documents were written, people immediately started making copies and passing them around. There are so many copies in existence that the New Testament is the best-documented piece of ancient literature in the world. And because there are so many copies, we can compare them to today's Bible and be assured that what we have is what

was written.

The Old Testament scribes were so meticulous in copying their manuscripts that they were obsessive about accuracy. They would count the middle letter of the entire original text and compare it to the middle letter of the new copy. If it didn't match, they'd make a new copy. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, they demonstrated that this collection of Old Testament scriptures has been faithfully preserved for two thousand years.

Many people believe that certain parts of the Bible have been corrupted or deleted, such as supposed teaching on reincarnation. However, this is just hearsay from people who do not understand how the canon of scripture was decided on. From the beginning of the church, Christians recognized the 27 books that make up the New Testament as God's inspired word, and the writings that weren't inspired were eventually dropped. We have some great articles on our Web site that explain about the reliability of the Bible.[{4}](#)

Many Christians believe another myth: "I believe in Jesus, but surely God will let people of other faiths into heaven too." Many seem to think that being a "good Muslim" or a "sincere Buddhist" should count for something.

This does make sense from a human perspective, but God didn't leave us in the dark trying to figure out truth on our own. He has revealed truth to us, both through Jesus and through the Bible. So regardless of what makes sense from our limited human perspective, we need to trust what God has said.

And Jesus, who ought to know because He is God in the flesh, said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) No other religion deals with the problem of sin and God's requirement of perfection and holiness on God's terms. There may be many ways to Jesus, but there's only way to the Father. It's God's heaven, and He

makes the rules: it's Jesus or nothing.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr. Al Meredith, the pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, for this perspective. Wedgwood Baptist was the site of the massacre the night of the "See You At the Pole" celebration when seven youth and staff members were killed and seven others wounded by a crazed gunman.
2. Jeff Kinkade, pastor of Reinhardt Bible Church in Garland, Texas.
3. "[Probe Answers Our E-Mail: Help Me Understand Rewards in Heaven.](#)"
4. "[Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](#)". Also, "[The Authority of the Bible](#)" and "[The Christian Canon](#)".

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The Will of God

Christians often suffer anxiety over knowing the will of God. Should we? Maybe we have a wrong understanding of what it is or how to know it.

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



"Evangelicals differ from most Roman Catholics and liberals in that they are constantly uptight about guidance," says J.I. Packer. "No other concern commands more interest or arouses more anxiety among them nowadays than discovering the will of God."[\[1\]](#)

I know what he means. How many times have I fretted over *what* I was supposed to do? And *when*? And *how*? A number of readers are probably nodding in agreement right now. The desire to do what God wills for us slips almost unnoticed from a simple desire to please into a fretful anxiety. We're confronted with a decision that must be made, and when no solution comes readily to mind, we look to God to tell us what to do. When no answer is immediately forthcoming, we begin to panic. Or maybe we've been taught that our hearts are "desperately wicked," so any idea or desire we have just has to be opposed to what God wants. So we throw that possibility out and look for the answer that must be right because it's just what we *wouldn't* want to do!

Packer's experience is that "the more earnest and sensitive a believer is, the more likely he or she is to be hung up about guidance."[{2}](#) We want to do what is right, but we aren't sure *what* we're to do or *how* we're to do it. And we fear the consequences if we get it wrong.

Why do we worry so much about finding God's will? Could it be we have a distorted idea of what it is or of how to find it?

An idea about God's will found frequently in the church is that God has a plan prepared for each individual life and it is our duty to discover what it contains and follow it. If we fail to do just the right thing, we will probably have to settle for second best or worse. And a number of us seem to have a really hard time finding out what it is. Garry Friesen calls this the "traditional view,"[{3}](#) but Packer points out that this "traditional view" goes back no further than about 150 years.[{4}](#)

What's going on? Does God have us on a great big scavenger hunt, poking about here and there, trying to find His elusive will before time runs out? Bruce Waltke likens this view to "a version of the old con man's ruse, the three-shell game,"[{5}](#) where a rock is put under one of three shells that are slid

around the table in a confusing fashion to make you lose track of where it is. Is God playing games with us? Or is He telling us but we're hard of hearing?

Packer notes that this view can leave Christians feeling second-rate. "You may not be on the scrapheap, but you are on the shelf," he says. He also says that this perspective leads to fear, causing some to avoid making decisions for fear of messing up, or others to live their lives with heavy hearts, believing they've already messed up and are stuck with less than God's best. Of course, God must then be rather upset with us.

Besides this, Waltke believes this view can result in immaturity since it isn't really up to us to *choose*, but rather to simply pick the shell under which is the rock.

Does it make sense that God would make finding His will so hard? That can't be right. Maybe we have a wrong understanding about what it means to know God's will or even what God's will *is*.

The Will of God in Scripture

In the Bible, the "will of God" refers to a few things. It can mean the eternal, sovereign plan of God, which will be accomplished *regardless* of any conscious acceptance and participation on our part. (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:9-11) We cannot undo the sovereign will of God. The phrase can also be used "to describe God's desire or consent – what He wants and what is favorable to Him," as Waltke puts it.[{6}](#) This includes God's laws or specific instructions that we can choose to obey or disobey, or a desire of His for a specific situation as when Moses had to settle disputes between the people of Israel. (Ex. 8:15,16)

More often than not, the "will of God" in Scripture refers to God's moral laws or commands dealing with the stuff of

everyday life. In the Old Testament we read, "Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law, And keep it with all my heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it" (Ps. 119: 34,35), and "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."(Ps. 40:8) In addition to these general laws, however, occasionally, prophets gave instructions regarding specific matters.

In the New Testament we find Paul giving the Ephesians general instructions for not living as the world does. He writes, "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Eph. 5:17) Instructing the Thessalonians about sexual purity he writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." (1 Th. 4:3) Waltke sums up several passages when he says that "God's will is that you be holy, wise, mature, joyful, prayerful, and submissive." [\[7\]](#)

Does He have a specific plan for each of us? Surely He does, for how could He work the whole of history toward His desired end if the individual parts were left indefinite? Paul introduced himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." (Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1) The question is: Is God going to tell us what to do in each specific situation? And, is it true that there's only one right choice?

Foundations of Decision Making

Typically when we find ourselves concerned about the will of God, it's in the context of decision making. There are several elements in the decision making process. Before looking at some of them, however, I need to establish a few foundations.

First, we need to reintegrate the concept of knowing and living in God's will into the whole fabric of our lives. It is a matter of importance for all our lives, not just for decision making. Understanding this casts a new light on what is meant by the "will of God." [\[8\]](#)

Second, against the “traditional” view of decision making, I believe that there *isn't* necessarily only one right choice with respect to nonmoral decisions. We give the different elements of decision making their due place in our consideration, make the best choice we know how, and trust God to accomplish His will. Unless there is undoubtable direction by God to go a specific way, we have the freedom and the responsibility to choose.[{9}](#)

Third, there is a change in how people seek guidance from the era of the Old Covenant to that of the New. In Old Testament times, people used various ways of divining God's will, including casting lots, using the Urim and Thummim, and interpreting dreams. However, things changed after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke points out that “after Pentecost there is no instance of the church seeking God's will through any of the forms of divination” seen in the Old Testament. “The New Testament gives no explicit command to ‘find God's will,’ nor can you find any particular instructions on how to go about finding God's will.”[{10}](#) He later adds, “God does not administer His church in the same way He administered old Israel.”[{11}](#) In Acts 1:24 we read of the apostles casting lots to know God's will about choosing another apostle to take Judas' place, but after this, “there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God's will” recorded.[{12}](#)

Fourth, good decision making comes through having a close relationship with God, which is fostered in a variety of ways.[{13}](#) It is the very things that we do or should do *routinely* that assist us in making decisions, things such as learning the Bible, praying, being in close fellowship with other believers, etc. We do the kinds of things that work together to conform us into His image, and these very things feed our ability to make wise decisions along the way.

Fifth and last, the elements of decision making don't form some kind of neat, orderly system in which particular steps

are taken in a necessary order, one following the other, so that when we reach the end the decision pops out.[{14}](#) Each element is weighed along with the others with some having more weight than others. For example, both my desires and the Bible are elements of decision making. But the Bible carries more weight. Sometimes one of the elements might incline us to say “no,” but consideration of another, more weighty one will change that to a “yes.” This is a part of wise thinking: understanding the weight of each factor using God’s understanding as the standard.

So how do we go about seeking guidance for making decisions? Let’s look at a few elements of decision making.

Elements of Decision Making

The Bible

Romans 12:2 says we are able to “test and approve what God’s will is” as our minds are renewed. And this renewal comes through a knowledge of His Word illuminated by His Spirit.

As God’s Word is our final authority for faith, it is our final authority for practice as well. It is our most authoritative source for knowing God and His will. Solomon said we would know how to live as we follow God’s commands: “When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you.” (Prov. 6:22) Waltke notes what Paul says about the purpose of Scripture: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. It is there that we learn about God and His work, find rebuke and correction when we stray, and discover what makes for righteous living. This includes the decision making part of life.

Because of the clarity of Scripture on many things, we have an immediate answer for a lot of the decisions we have to make. For example, a man doesn’t need to ask if it’s God’s will for

him to fool around with his neighbor's wife! The Bible is clear on that.

In addition to telling us what *not* to do, the Bible also has a lot to say about what we *should* do. We learn about the love of God and what that means for relating and reaching out to other people. We learn about the value of the created realm, of work, of personal gifting, of money. We learn about the overall project of God (redemption), and we see how we can model a redemptive love in our world today.

The desires of our heart

Another source for obtaining guidance is the desires of our heart.[{15}](#) Are you surprised? Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." Delighting in Him involves wanting what He wants, molding our desires to His. This comes through walking closely with Him.

God gives us talents and abilities for a reason! If these things are honorable and useful for God's kingdom, they aren't to be rejected simply out of fear that God might not like us to do something we enjoy! As one man put it, we can "love God and do what we please" when we walk close to Him, because we know Him and the kinds of things He desires.

Prayer and meditation

Walking closely with God can only happen through constant prayer. This is another significant element of decision making. Through prayer, we force ourselves to stay attuned to God. Our prayer is fed by a knowledge of and meditation upon His Word. Sometimes wise decisions become clear when distractions are put away and our minds are allowed to focus and do their work uninterrupted. We pray about particular

issues, but we also pray for understanding in general. Paul prayed that the Colossians would learn God's will "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." (Col. 1:9) To all who ask believing, as James says, such wisdom will be given "generously and without reproach." (1:5)

One very important element of knowing God's mind and will is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. His presence within us is one of the major differences between us and Old Testament saints. This, I think, is significant with respect to knowing God's will.

One way the Spirit helps us in knowing God's will is what we call illumination, the means by which He helps us understand the deeper significance of Scripture. Another way is through bringing things to our attention. J. I. Packer speaks of "nudges" of the Spirit, or a "focusing of concern." (See Acts 17:16) "When we say we have a 'vision' or 'burden' about something," he says, "we are referring to an impression. When our concern is biblically proper, we are right to regard our impression as a nudge from the Holy Spirit."[\[16\]](#)

Sometimes Christians say the Lord has "told" them to do something. While we cannot – and do not wish to – define the limits of how God can guide us, we can learn from Scripture what we might expect. Those who say God gives special revelations of His will sometimes refer to instances such as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, or Peter's on Simon the Tanner's roof where he learned that a change in dietary laws was being made. But notice that such special revelations came without being asked for; they didn't come in response to a desire to know God's will. Bruce Waltke notes that, "There is no place in the New Testament where we are taught to seek a special revelation" from God.[\[17\]](#) Paul spends a good amount of time teaching the church how to do the will of God. One might expect at least *some* attention given to seeking God's will through a direct word of the Spirit to individuals if that's how God typically works. But it isn't there. Again, the

question isn't whether God *can* speak this way, for surely He can. We're speaking here of the norm, of what we can expect from God in the normal course of life.

What should we do if we believe the Spirit is speaking directly to us? Packer believes (and I agree) "that impressions must be rigorously tested by biblical wisdom—the corporate wisdom of the believing community as well as personal wisdom. If this is not done," he continues, "impressions that are rooted in egoism, pride, headstrong unrealism, the fancy that irrationality glorifies God, a sense that some human being is infallible, or similar misconceptions will be allowed to masquerade as Spirit-given."[18](#)

The church

Speaking of corporate wisdom, the counsel of others is an important element in making decisions. "Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory," we read in Proverbs 11:14. Such counsel is to be found primarily in the church, for it is the church that is responsible to do the will of God on earth. Sometimes we can find good counsel on some matters from non-Christians. But when we're thinking of the major decisions of life we look to the church where we should be able to find those who share our Christian beliefs, who have the mind of Christ, and who are mature in godly wisdom. "Personal guidance," says Packer, "that we believe we have received by inner nudge from the Lord needs to be checked with believers who are capable of recognizing unrealism, delusion, and folly when they see it."[19](#)

Not only can we find guidance for dealing with ideas we have, but also the church is a channel for the Spirit calling us to do something new. Through the church, the Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. (Acts 13:2,3)[20](#) In the

fellowship of believers we have a place to discover the abilities we have and to put them to use, and to be drawn into places we never thought we could go.

Providence

The providence of God is another element of the decision making process. This is God's direct dealing in His world in general and in our lives in particular – His sovereign governance of the world.[{21}](#) By God's providence the stars stay in their orbits and the rain waters the earth. By His *special* providence "God's hand is 'visible' in a sense to Christians who have watched all the pieces to one or more of life's puzzles fall into place in a very special way."[{22}](#)

Often, things seem to just happen in our lives by chance. More often than not it is in hindsight that we see the Lord at work. By "chance" you meet someone who turns out to be a valuable resource for some project you're working on. Without thinking anything about it you say something encouraging to someone who was that very day going to quit her job out of a sense of hopelessness, and she reconsiders. Just a week or so ago a pastor told me about a certain speaker that he was going to have come to his church next year. I told him about some things that the man had written that he might not know about, which could prove the speaker a poor choice. After I told him, he said our conversation was providential. He researched the matter himself and agreed with me.

A note of caution must be sounded here. It is possible to misinterpret the events of our lives, leading us to think God is doing one thing when it is really something else He's up to. As with the other elements of decision making, our interpretations need to be considered in light of the other elements.

Because God's sovereign plan *will* be done, it isn't up to us

to consciously bring it about. However, by being aware of how God is at work, we have clues about how to make decisions. We also grow in our faith as we see plans fall together that we have presented to Him, and we learn to relax in His control in our lives.

Wisdom

Wisdom is a major element of decision making that operates throughout the whole process. Garry Friesen calls his understanding of biblical decision making “the way of wisdom.” Paul wrote, “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.” (Eph. 5:15)

Wisdom is fundamentally a character trait. One writer notes that “the major thrust of wisdom in the Old Testament was a code of moral conduct . . . a way of thinking and conduct that is orderly, socially sensitive, and morally upright.”[\[23\]](#) This theme is continued in the New Testament, for example, in Paul’s prayer that we gain “spiritual wisdom and understanding,” so we “may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work.” (Col. 1:9,10) We might define wisdom as “a right ordering of life in keeping with the nature and will of God.”

James tells us if we ask for wisdom believing, we will receive it. (1:5-8) But note that “wisdom” isn’t the same as “wise answer.” We won’t have to grow in wisdom if God tells us everything to do. We would always like children need to be led. If we understand the character of God and walk closely with Him, learning to think with the mind of Christ, we will grow in our ability to make wise choices.

Faith

Finally, we come to faith, an element that is essential in all areas of the Christian life. All things the Christian does are to be done in faith. Paul says that whatever isn't of faith is sin. (Rom. 14:23) Recall that James said we must ask for wisdom *in faith* (1:6). Faith allows us to rest, to not be anxious, to believe God cares and is in control.

We learn and live the Christian life, walking near to God, growing in wisdom. In times of decision, wisdom chooses the best course while faith rests on God's promises to guide us and be with us. We decide a course of action, and faith carries us through.

Summary

To sum up, then, knowing God's will means fundamentally knowing Him and what pleases Him. Although on occasion there could be an unusually clear leading of God, for the most part we make decisions based on the input we gain through the normal course of discipleship, pulled together in spiritual wisdom, trusting God to accomplish His will, and resting in that confidence.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, "Guidance: How God Leads Us" in *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale Publishers, 1987), 105.
2. Packer, 106.
3. Friesen rejects this view. See his *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980).
4. Packer, 110, 116.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 7. "Most ancient texts still extant [nearly 80%] deal with divining the mind of God," 26.
7. Waltke, 71.
8. As an aid to this, Waltke suggest we talk about the

guidance of God rather than the will of God when making decisions. Cf. Waltke, 169.

9. Cf. Friesen, 179.

10. Waltke, 12.

11. Waltke, 54-55.

12. Waltke, 53. The word translated “show us” isn’t used again in the New Testament after Pentecost. It is only used elsewhere in Luke 10:1 referring to when Jesus appointed or “showed” the seventy disciples whom He sent out.

13. Waltke, 16.

14. Waltke believes there is an important order to the steps (see Waltke, p. 59), but I disagree. I do see a certain order of priority with respect to the weight of particular elements, however.

15. Waltke, 86.

16. Packer, 128.

17. Waltke, 19.

18. Packer, 129.

19. Packer, 122.

20. Cf. Waltke, 109.

21. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), s.v. “Providence,” by Walter Elwell.

22. Rick Wade, “Miracles.” Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Internet at www.probe.org/miracles/.

23. Elwell, s.v. “Wisdom,” by C. Hassell Bullock.

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Christian Rumors

Madalyn Murray O'Hair

No doubt you've heard them and wondered if they were true. Stories about Madalyn Murray O'Hair's campaign against Christian radio, Janet Reno's definition of a cult or Charles Darwin's supposed deathbed conversion. Are they true or not?

Believe me—I see more than my share of these myths and rumors. Because of my public visibility and presence on various web pages, I probably get a lot more e-mail messages than most people do. So I probably see a higher percentage of myths and rumors than most. Yet, I am amazed at the number of rumors flying around the Internet.

And we get lots of phone calls at Probe from people wondering if various stories they have heard are true. Others forward e-mail messages they receive and ask if they are true, before they forward them to others.

Many of these messages are relatively harmless ones like the promise that you will get free M&Ms if you forward an e-mail message to someone. This apparently has mutated into the belief that IBM will send you a free computer if you forward a particular e-mail. Supposedly IBM is doing this because of a recent merger between Hewlett-Packard and Gateway. As my teenage daughter likes to say, "Yeah right!" Oh, and don't forget about the GAP offering free clothing because of a supposed merger with Abercrombie and Fitch.

Some other rumors are harmful to companies. One example would be the false rumor that an executive with Proctor and Gamble announced he was a Satanist on the *Sally Jesse Raphael Show*. The original rumor had this happening on *The Donahue Show*. And then there's the rumor that the designer Liz Claiborne told the *Oprah* audience that she donates profits to the Church of Satan. None of these rumors are true, yet these e-mails still show up in Probe's inbox on a fairly regular basis.

In this article I want to address what I consider to be the major myths and rumors that are spread by the Christian community. With so many, I had to be selective; so I tried to focus on those persistent myths spread by Christians and some of the rumors which seem to nearly have a life of their own.

The most persistent rumor in the Christian community over the last few decades is the mistaken belief that atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair has been trying to ban religious broadcasting through petition RM 2493. Back in December 1974, there was a petition by Jeremy Lanaman and Lorenzo Milam to investigate radio stations with non-commercial educational licenses. The FCC unanimously rejected the petition in August 1975. But somehow the original information mutated into the current rumor that Madalyn Murray O'Hair was trying to remove Christian radio stations from the airwaves. The rumor wasn't true when she was alive, and certainly isn't true now. Nevertheless, the FCC has received millions and millions of bogus petitions. Let me state once again, the rumor isn't true and all of us should do what we can to stop the rumor.

Janet Reno, Enemy of Christians

I am trying to address what I consider to be the major myths and rumors that are spread by the Christian community. Many of these show up in e-mails, while others are repeated by Christian speakers and believed to be true, even though they are false.

One persistent rumor has been attributed to former Attorney General Janet Reno, who supposedly defines Christians as belonging to a cult. Let me quote from one variation of the e-mail.

Are you a cultist, ACCORDING TO JANET RENO?? . . . I certainly HOPE SO!! Attorney General Janet Reno, "A cultist is one who has a strong belief in the Bible and the Second Coming of Christ; who frequently attends Bible studies; who

has a high level of financial giving to a Christian cause; who home schools their children; who has accumulated survival foods and has a strong belief in the Second Amendment; and who distrusts big government. Any of these may qualify a person as a cultist but certainly more than one of these would cause us to look at this person as a threat, and his family as being in a risk situation that qualified for government interference.” Janet Reno, Attorney General, USA Interview on 60 Minutes, June 26, 1994 Do you qualify? Are you (as defined by the U.S. Attorney General) a threat? If any of these apply to you then you are!! This worries me. Does it worry you? Let’s impeach her too!!! Everyone in this country “The land of the free” with computer access should copy this and send to every man, woman and child who can read.

The quote is a hoax, but that didn’t stop many Christians from trying to send this e-mail to nearly everyone they knew that had access to the Internet. Even now that Janet Reno is no longer Attorney General, this e-mail still circulates on a fairly regular basis.

Here are the facts. According to CBS, Janet Reno did not appear on *60 Minutes* in 1994. And it is doubtful that she would ever say something so inflammatory on this program or any other program. If she had, certainly it would have made front-page news to define millions of Christians as “cultists” and a “threat” to society.

The Office of Legislative Affairs in the Justice Department says they believe the quote first appeared in the August 1993 edition of the “Paul Revere Newsletter” published by the Christian Defense League in Flora, Illinois. The group has been described by some as a “far right hate group” holding to racist and anti-Semitic views. The newsletter subsequently ran a retraction.

This is the unfortunate origin of this persistent e-mail message. Unknowingly, Christians circulated a rumor started by a group bent on attacking the Attorney General. They did so because Christians were attacked as being cultists, thus they spread a rumor that was not true.

Joshua's Long Day

One story that has been around for quite a long time is the myth of NASA discovering Joshua's long day. As the story goes, computers at the space agency discovered that as they went back in time the calculations did not work. Scientists doing orbital mechanics calculations to determine the positions of the planets in the future realized that they were off by a day. A biblical scholar in the group supposedly solved the question when he remembered the passage in Joshua 10:13 which says that "the sun stood still, and the moon stopped" for about a whole day.

Attempts to verify the story through the NASA Spaceflight Center in Maryland never materialized. But that didn't stop the spreading of the story that NASA found computer evidence of a missing day, which thereby verified the story of Joshua's long day.

As it turns out, the apparent origin of this story precedes NASA by many years. Harry Rimmer wrote about astronomical calculations recorded by Professor C.A. Totten of Yale University in his 1936 book *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*.^[1] He quotes professor Totten, who said, "[A] fellow professor, an accomplished astronomer, made the strange discovery that the earth was twenty-four hours out of schedule!" He says that Professor Totten challenged this man to investigate the question of the inspiration of the Bible. Some time later, his colleague replied: "In the tenth chapter of Joshua, I found the missing twenty-four hours accounted for. Then I went back and checked up on my figures, and found that at the time of Joshua there were only 23 hours and 20

minutes lost.”

Researchers have gone back to Professor Totten’s book *Joshua’s Long Day and the Dial of Ahaz* (published in 1890) and have not been able to find the story of the astronomer. Instead they find his argument for the lost day based upon the chronology of Jesus Christ. He believed that Christ must have been born at the fall equinox and that the world was created four thousand years before Christ was born. He therefore calculates that the world was created on September 22, 4000 b.c. This day must be a Sunday, but using a calendar we find that this date was a Monday. Therefore, argues Professor Totten, Joshua’s long day accounts for this “missing day.”

As you can see, there is no story about NASA scientists, nor are there even skeptical astronomers. He makes a number of very questionable assumptions in order to supposedly “prove” Joshua’s long day.

The story of NASA verifying Joshua’s long day is a myth that has been passed down for decades and apparently has its origins from stories recorded even before NASA existed. The story is false.

Darwin’s Deathbed Conversion

One of the most persistent stories is the *supposed* conversion of Charles Darwin and his *supposed* rejection of evolution on his deathbed. Christian speakers and writers retell this story with great regularity even though there is good evidence that Darwin remained an agnostic and an evolutionist to the day of his death. And even if the story was true (and it is not), its retelling is irrelevant to whether the theory of evolution is true. Darwin did not recant, and scientists would continue to teach the theory even if he had changed his mind.

The origin of this story can be traced to one “Lady Hope” who started the story after the death of Charles Darwin. On one

occasion, Lady Hope spoke to a group of young men and women at the school founded by the evangelist D. L. Moody at Northfield, Massachusetts. According to her, Darwin had been reading the book of Hebrews on his deathbed. She said he asked for the local Sunday school to sing in a summerhouse on the grounds, and had confessed: "How I wish I had not expressed my theory of evolution as I have done." She even said he would like her to gather a congregation since he "would like to speak to them of Christ Jesus and His salvation, being in a state where he was eagerly savouring the heavenly anticipation of bliss." {2}

D. L. Moody encouraged Lady Hope to publish her story, and it was printed in the Boston *Watchman Examiner*. The story spread, and the claims have been republished and restated ever since.

The claims were refuted at the time and were subsequently addressed by Darwin's son and daughter when they were revived years later. In 1918, Francis Darwin made this public statement:

Lady Hope's account of my father's views on religion is quite untrue. I have publicly accused her of falsehood, but have not seen any reply. My father's agnostic point of view is given in my Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Vol. I., pp. 304-317. You are at liberty to publish the above statement. Indeed, I shall be glad if you will do so.

Darwin's daughter, Henrietta, writing in the *Christian* for February 23, 1922, said she was present at her father's deathbed. "Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness. I believe he never even saw her, but in any case she had no influence over him in any department of thought or belief. He never recanted any of his scientific views, either then or earlier. We think the story of his conversion was fabricated in the U.S.A." She concluded by saying, "The whole story has no foundation whatever."

So that is the history of the story of Charles Darwin's deathbed conversion. It simply is not true.

Satanic Affiliations

Now I would like to conclude by looking at rumors linking various individuals and groups to Satan.

One individual linked to Satan is J. K. Rowling, the author of the best-selling *Harry Potter* series. Although we at Probe have expressed some concern over the books, we believe some of the criticism concerning her has been unfair. One purported quotation making the rounds comes from a satirical publication known as *The Onion*. Supposedly she says, "I think it's absolute rubbish to protest children's books on the grounds that they are luring children to Satan. People should be praising them for that! These books guide children to an understanding that the weak, idiotic Son of God is a living hoax who will be humiliated when the rain of fire comes." The quote goes on to use pornographic language.

Editors at *The Onion* made up the quote along with just about everything else in the article. The fictitious article includes mock quotes from blaspheming children planning satanic rituals. It claimed that fourteen million American children have joined the Church of Satan because of the *Harry Potter* series. Unfortunately, many Christians did not understand that the magazine is a blatantly satirical tabloid attempting to lampoon Christians concerned about the *Harry Potter* series.

A similar rumor surfaced in the 1980s when chain letters and petitions supposedly documented that the Procter & Gamble symbol was really a satanic symbol. According to the story, the company's historic "man in the moon" symbol was the devil. And Procter & Gamble executives supposedly appeared on a TV talk show (Phil Donahue or Sally Jesse Raphael) to boast that their company gave some of their profits to the Church of

Satan.

I think the lesson this week is that Christians should be more discerning. If you receive a letter or e-mail full of sensational information, you should ask yourself why this is the first you have heard about it. If Janet Reno or J.K. Rowling or an executive with Procter & Gamble said the things they allegedly said, wouldn't you have heard about it long before you received this letter or e-mail? If it sounds incredible, maybe that's because it isn't credible. If you have questions, feel free to write us or call us at Probe or check out the numerous Web sites dedicated to debunking myths, rumors, and urban legends. In the meantime, we should all learn to be more discerning.

Notes

1. Harry Rimmer, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture* (1936), 281-282.
2. Ronald W. Clark, *The Survival of Charles Darwin: a Biography of a Man and an Idea* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985), 199.

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The World in Our Worship

Worship is an essential part of the Christian life. Rick Wade briefly considers a few essentials of corporate worship, and then looks at three characteristics of secular thought which undermine proper worship.

Choices in Worship

Church historian Bruce Shelley reports on a speaking engagement he had with a group of senior adults about recent changes in evangelical churches. When he mentioned drums in worship, he said, “even the breath-taking surroundings [of the Colorado Rockies] couldn’t suppress the sanctified outrage” he heard. “Like a match dropped on a haystack,” he said, “the room erupted first in a corporate groan, followed by an outburst of laughter.”^{1} Clearly such changes don’t sit well with many Christians. Those who appreciate a more traditional approach to worship are concerned that the contemporary style of worship risks diluting the message of the church by modeling itself on the secular entertainment industry in its style, and thus risks the accommodation of the message to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, those who believe the traditional approach has become outdated are accepting contemporary worship widely. For some, the change is simply a matter of taste: they like contemporary music and a relaxed atmosphere. For others, contemporary worship seems like a better approach to reach today’s generations. In his book, *The Second Coming of the Church*, George Barna makes this startling statement: “After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life.”^{2} The church is not effectively speaking to its surrounding culture, he says, and is becoming largely irrelevant. Adapting worship services is one part of addressing this problem.

Still a third worship option for evangelicals who are tired of traditional worship but think the contemporary style is inadequate as well, is that of liturgical worship. Through the ceremony and ritual of liturgical services conducted in settings with objects rich with symbolism, some Christians look for a special encounter with God. The October 6, 1997

issue of *Christianity Today* had on its cover a picture of a woman with a glazed look in her eyes. Above her head was the question: "Missing God at church?"^{3} A student interviewed in the cover article said this about her church background: "There was no imagination, no mystery, no beauty. It was all preaching and books and application." Another student spoke of the loss of the sense of the divine in worship today. "Gymnasiums and impermanent buildings" have replaced "the splendor and holiness of cathedrals," she said. "Plastic cups and folding chairs aren't enough," she continued. "There has to be an environment that communicates God's holiness to my senses and to my spirit."

A fourth option for worship is one championed by Robert Webber: that of blended worship. This is especially appealing to young people. It reflects, to a degree, postmodern thinking. We are no longer restricted to choosing one style over another. Now that the rigid demands of modernism have broken down, people feel free to choose facets of different styles to form something new.

Some might think that differences between worship services are really merely stylistic. Each person has his or her preferences regarding worship, right? Some prefer one style, some another. But are the differences only stylistic? Is it true that worship style is basically a matter of individual preference? Are there any objective criteria for corporate worship? If there are, then we can look for the necessary elements as we consider a certain style of worship.^{4} On the other hand, we can also look for things to avoid in worship, things that would hinder true worship. Are influences from secular culture coming into the church and adversely affecting our worship?

Let's consider first some goals of corporate worship. Following that, we'll consider three cultural forces that serve to undermine proper worship.

Three Goals of Worship

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*,^[5] Marva Dawn says there are three goals of worship: praising God, building up the community, and nurturing the believer.

Praising God

The obvious answer to the question “Why do we worship?” is, “To give praise and glory to God.” Said the Levites, “Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!” (Neh. 9:5). In praise we have our focus on God and not ourselves. At least we think we do.

However, too often our thoughts about God center around what He has done for *us*, for *me*. Consider, for example, the songs many of us sing in church. So many of them have *I* as the real subject. God is praised for what He means to *me*.

Is it wrong to praise and thank God for what He has done for me? Not at all! Of course, we should do this. The problem is this: we come to worship God in His *fullness*, but we end up praising Him for what *we've* experienced. The being and work of God is reduced to the limits of our own experience! But we're dealing with the transcendent One here! The One who spoke the stars into existence, who cares for all others in His family the same as He cares for me, and all at the same time! God's project is bigger than I am. God's being is bigger than what I have personally experienced. In addition to praising God for what He has done for us individually, we should be worshiping God for the things He does that have nothing to do with us in particular. By worshiping Him in His fullness we open ourselves up for riches we didn't expect and maybe never even imagined.

Building Up the Body

In worship we also build up the community of faith. We are

part of something much bigger than our own church or denomination; we are part of something which began two millennia ago and which will continue to grow until the Lord returns.

What does this have to do with worship? First, when we come together for worship we are a worshipping *community*, not just a bunch of individuals gathered in the same room. When we are together we can turn from our occupation with ourselves and focus on the development of God's people as a body. We are not to mirror our narcissistic and individualistic society, but rather to turn outward to the community. Says Dawn, "Worship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members."[{6}](#)

Second, in worship we can also hear from members of the church from generations past through their writings and art. In turn, we nurture and protect that which we have inherited so we can pass it on intact to succeeding generations. Worship aids significantly in this project. Says Dawn, "Worship forms us; all the elements of the service develop the character of believer in us. And worship forms the community if it unites us in common beliefs, traditions, renewal, and goals. Worship schools us in the language of faith as we listen and sing and participate in its rites." She continues: "We can only pass on the faith if it has nurtured our character to be its carriers and if we are part of a community, the Church, that has carried the faith down through the ages."[{7}](#)

So, when we sing, for example, do we draw into ourselves and enjoy our own private worship? Or are we purposefully singing *with* other believers, lifting up one sound of praise to God? Do we come to church with our focus on what we hope to get out of the service? Or are we thinking about how we are going to lift others before the Lord? Are we listening to Christians from ages past who have dealt with some of the same ideas and

issues we struggle with? And are we thinking about those who will come after us, about the legacy we will leave behind?

The individualism of our age fights us here. It sets us up to be a lot of little Christian islands in a sanctuary or auditorium. We are not many individuals who just happen to have a religious bond. What we are really is a body made up of many members. Worship that recognizes God as the subject will be worship that builds up His body.

Nurturing Character

Another goal of worship is the nurturing of our character. Worship should transform us as a result of being brought into the presence of the living God. It was entering the sanctuary of God that gave Asaph a right understanding of God and His ways with men, which took away Asaph's bitterness (Ps. 73). Think of Isaiah, who was made whole and prepared to serve after beholding the glory of God and his own sinfulness (Is. 6). This isn't just a matter of growing in faith and going deeper in our prayer life. It's also a matter of becoming good people, people whose character is like that of Jesus!

Too often, however, *our* idea of being transformed is leaving church feeling good! We want to feel better about ourselves, to be lifted up! Yet, we all know in the normal course of life that building up often means tearing down first. This is especially the case when we think about being conformed to the image of Christ. In fact, Marva Dawn says that worship ought to *kill* us. What does she mean by this? She says:

"In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God's Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness Once worship kills us, we are born anew to worship God rightly." [\[8\]](#)

Worship, then, serves to praise God, build up the community,

and nurture our character.

Subjectivism: Worship Beginning With Me Rather Than With God

Let's begin looking at three forces, which work to undermine proper worship: subjectivism, self-focused individualism, and dumbing down the message. Our critique will not be focused on any particular worship style. Indeed, these problems can be found across the spectrum.

"Me" As Subject

Let's begin with subjectivism. This is a common attitude today. I find what is true and good within myself. My personal experience is what counts.^{9} Therefore, I am the judge of what is worthwhile in my worship. I expect the sermon to be on my level (none of that heavy theology stuff), the music to suit the tastes I've already developed, and the service time to not be too long. And the service is evaluated by how I feel when it's over. What matters is *my* spiritual experience *now*.

Seeing God As Subject As Well As Object

The problem here is that the center of worship is *I*, not God. Although I might be directing my thoughts toward God, I am patterning my worship so as to satisfy *myself*. The effect is that my understanding of God is restricted to what He has done in my life; my view of God is thus limited by my experience. When *my* experience of God sets the limits, I'll have a shrunken view of God.

The key to getting God fully into the picture is to see Him as the *subject* of worship, and not just the *object*. What do I mean by this? Says theologian Marva Dawn, "The gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence."^{10} The content of our worship *comes* from Him; He is the source. He gives us Himself, tells us His

characteristics, and informs us of His plans. Having received this we turn back to God and make Him the *object* of our worship, giving it all back to Him in praise. As one writer puts it, "Worship . . . is an encounter in which God's glory, Word, and grace are unveiled, and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration." In our worship, we "recognize a Lord whose majesty evokes strong praise, petition, and transformation." {11} When we worship, we are reflecting God back to God. In filling our vision with God, we are met by Him. If we engineer our worship to meet *our* needs as we see them, on the other hand, we risk missing out on being touched by God in unexpected but vital ways.

I'd like to make one other point. With God as subject or source of worship, grace once again becomes central, for grace is the theme of His works on our behalf. When we are the subjects, however, *our* actions are the focus making *law* central. This leads to an emphasis on what we must do, rather than what *God* has done. {12}

On Worship Killing Us

With God as the subject of worship, it then becomes a vehicle of transformation in His hands. As I noted earlier, worship ought to *kill* us. It ought to make us see the great distance between God and ourselves. Once in God's presence our sinful nature is put to death. Then we are ready to be infused with His life. {13}

Worship is a subversive act, Dawn insists. We don't come before God to get His stamp of approval on our interests and agendas. God intends to turn us upside down. As Dawn says, "If the Church's worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God's truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it. Worship will turn our values, habits, and ideas upside-down as it forms our character; only then will we be genuinely right-side up eternally." {14}

When we have the attitude that the worship service is provided primarily to fix our individual problems, we get the cart before the horse. We aren't interested in being brought low before God. But it is only in being brought low that we can be lifted up, because it is only then that we both see our real need and surrender ourselves to God to do with as *He* pleases, not as we please.

We thus recognize God as both subject and object of worship, as the One who fills us with Himself, and as the One upon whom we shift our focus for our time of corporate worship.

Self-Focused Individualism: Worship Focused on Me Rather Than on the Body

One of the weaknesses of the church in modern times has been the failure to give due recognition to the fact that we are part of a community of faith. Ours is a narcissistic age; we've been taught to be self-absorbed in our "I did it my way" culture. Marva Dawn notes that in her observation of the church today Christians "rarely . . . think in terms of 'we' instead of 'I'." [\[15\]](#)

The Body Present, Past and Future

We aren't just a bunch of individuals thrown together in some loose confederation. We are a *body* that extends geographically around the world at the present, and which extends back in time 2000 years and forward until the Lord returns.

How can the church address this individualistic attitude? Dawn believes "that worship which keeps God as subject is the most important key, for God is the Creator of community and the preserver of the Church. . . . [W]orship that draws all its participants into a common understanding of God will develop vibrant communities—and then the communities in turn will also deepen the character growth of their members." [\[16\]](#) In our worship we study Scripture together, we speak the words of the

great creeds to each other, we sing as one voice, we agree in prayer. Such things foster in us a sense of oneness, of being part of a unity.

As we are part of the community present in our own day, we are also part of a community that began with the apostles and that will continue until the Lord comes. In our worship services the past can remain a part of the present through the inclusion of the wisdom of our forefathers through their writings, prayers, and liturgies. As I mentioned earlier, there is a new interest in liturgical worship among young people. Ancient writings "are seen as providing needed maturity as well as a connection to the faith of the church historical."[\[17\]](#) Also, the awareness that we are leaving a legacy for those who come after us provides an encouragement to transmit and maintain a correct understanding of God in our worship. A renewed understanding of the importance of the community of faith, then, gives us a foundation upon which to stand, and makes us aware of our responsibility to others.

Speaking to our Society

There is positive change in this regard in churches attuned to the situation of the younger generations. One of the characteristics of modernism was the psychological isolation it produced. We have been thinking in terms of personal needs and choices rather than in terms of obligations to the group. Against the existential idea that *my* experience *now* is what makes me what I am, leaving me essentially rootless and radically free, Christians find their identity in the enormous body of believers made alive through faith in Christ. Today, however, young people are crying out for community, and churches are meeting this challenge through various means. This is a key area where the church reveals its eternal relevance to the human situation; to ignore it will impoverish the church body, and will make Christianity seem truly irrelevant to the younger generations.

Dumbing Down the Message

A third problem sometimes found in churches today is that of “dumbing down” the message in an effort to make it understandable to everyone equally, even to non-believers who may be visiting.

While we should welcome nonbelievers into our churches, we have to ask whether keeping our worship on an elementary level is worth the cost of holding believers at the level of nonbelievers or new believers.

We need to remember first of all that the church is . . . well, the *church*. It’s the body of Christ made up of those who have been taken hold of by the Savior. It isn’t *unbelievers*. Worship is the work of believers, and the worship service should be geared toward them. It should not be governed by what the general population finds acceptable. As Martin Marty has said, “To give the whole store away to match what this year’s market says the unchurched want is to have the people who know least about the faith determine most about its expression.”[\[18\]](#)

Bringing People Up Rather than Dumbing the Message Down

Part of the mission of the church is bringing people into the kingdom, and our worship services can be good places to do this. But if in our worship we water down the message, we are robbing the visitor of the full truth he or she needs to hear. If we don’t give visitors an idea of how big God is, in the long run we won’t keep them. Why should they stay if they get little more than they can get outside the church? Church historian Martin Marty said this:

This writer fears that we are on the verge of seeing happen what happened in the 1950s to mainstream Protestant churches; they retooled for people who were casually attracted and liked big parking lots, spectacle, and low

demands; and the people left as easily as they came. [{19}](#)

One of the problems of the liberal church this century was that in its effort to be timely and relevant it “plunged more deeply into the needs and wishes of human beings—or a God sculpted more closely to the image of man.” [{20}](#) The attempt to keep God up-to-date winds up allowing “the world to call the tune for God.” It ignores the complexity of God; it forgets “the tensions that must exist between human’s wishes and the Creator’s intentions.” [{21}](#)

We must relate the message in accessible ways, but we needn’t assume that people can’t learn or aren’t willing to be stretched. The things of God, not the sensibilities of contemporary culture, should be the measure of our worship.

On Christians Getting Their “Meat” Elsewhere

Some might say that Christians can get their real “meat” in Sunday schools or in other separate study time. We forget that we learn about God through all parts of worship, and not just from the didactic teaching of a sermon or Sunday school class. To suggest that Christians get the “meat” of the faith in Sunday school is to reveal a modernistic bias in favor of head knowledge; i.e., the idea that knowing is simply a matter of adding to our mental database. Some might say that we are worshiping in Sunday school when we are being taught facts and ideas. But this is only a part of worship. Corporate worship is a special time for interaction with and getting to know God on multiple levels.

What is lost by not developing our understanding of God in the context of *worship*? Worship takes us beyond mere head knowledge; there is interaction between God and man and between Christians. In Sunday school we listen; in worship we listen and then talk back to God. It is like the difference between reading about someone and talking with him or her.

The goal in all of this is to see God as fully as we can and

be touched by Him. We use words and images and whatever else we need to lift us up to God, to let Him speak to us through whatever means are available.

Conclusion

Although someone will be hard pressed to find in Scripture a clear description of a proper worship style, we can find principles of proper worship, which apply whether one uses electric guitars or organs or no instruments at all. Furthermore, we can be careful to weed out of our worship—indeed, out of our thinking generally—ideas and attitudes that do not accord with what Scripture teaches. Subjectivism, individualism, and the dumbing down of the Word of God should not characterize our worship. It is hard to stand against one's culture, especially since we're all influenced by it. But we need to do it, for the health of the body and the individual, and for the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord.

Notes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, "Why Does Worship Keep Changing?" *Christian Reader*, December 1996. www.christianitytoday.com/cr/6r6/6r6049.html. This article gives a brief overview of the changes in worship since the Puritans. See also Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 97-101.
2. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
3. Gary Burge, "Missing God at Church," *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1997, 20-27.
4. See Jerry Solomon, "[Worship](#)," available on our web site at www.probe.org/docs/worship.html.
5. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.)

6. Dawn, 133.
7. Dawn, 149.
8. Dawn, 206.
9. See Donald G. Bloesch, "Whatever Happened to God?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 2001, 54-55.
10. Dawn, 80.
11. Burge, 22.
12. Dawn, 236.
13. Dawn, 206.
14. Dawn, 58.
15. Dawn, 131.
16. Dawn, 133.
17. Daniel Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1999.
www.christianitytoday.com/le/912/912037.html on Jan. 11, 2001.
18. Martin E. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot, and the People Will Come (and Go)," *Context* 25, no. 4 (15 Feb. 1993): 3-4. Quoted in Dawn, 258.
19. Marty, "Build a Parking Lot," quoted in Dawn, 258.
20. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 113. Quoted in Dawn, 299.
21. Turner, quoted in Dawn, 300-301.

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Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his "true enemy" was not the Nazis but "religion," the Christian church. What

inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had "an enduring effect" on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about "God Almighty." But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as an "act of defiance."

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve he was horrified to learn of his father's youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. "Jew! Get off the pavement!" a "Christian" had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a "wish fulfillment," he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation's leading journalists and historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud's 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn's first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft's founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the “painful riddle of death,” Freud once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson’s death brought great grief: “Everything has lost its meaning to me... I can find no joy in life.” In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer’s pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God’s love, who could tactfully explain the faith’s rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology—and history—be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be “Christians” but don’t have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. “Christians aren’t perfect,” reads a popular bumper sticker, “just forgiven.”

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His

mouth.” The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life’s most difficult circumstances.

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Christian Cliches

Conversations and Clichés

Do you ever use clichés? Do you hear them often? No doubt you can answer “Yes” to either question. But have you stopped to consider what they may mean? Christians often use clichés among themselves and even with non-Christians, but there may be a need to give thought to the meanings of these oft-repeated phrases. That is the intent of this essay. We will investigate what is behind the “Christian clichés” that tend to become so much a part of our conversations.

Let’s begin by considering a dictionary definition of the word *cliché*. A cliché is a “trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse.”^{1}

My ministry has put me in touch with Christians all over this country. As I engage in conversation with these Christians, invariably I will hear language about Christian things that has become “stereotyped” and has “lost impact by long overuse.” This doesn’t mean there isn’t truth contained in the clichés. Indeed, often there is truth of great importance for

Christian theology and life. The problem is that frequently we use these clichés while thinking we know what we are saying. But do we? Could we explain these phrases if someone were to ask us to define them? My experience is that Christians have difficulty when asked to explain themselves.

Let's listen to the following conversation and hear how a Christian named Tom responds to questions from a non-believer named Sam.

Tom: Hi, Sam!

Sam: Hello, Tom. Remember when you were talking to Jim yesterday?

Tom: You mean before the sales meeting?

Sam: Yeah. I hope you aren't offended, but I was listening to your conversation.

Tom: Oh, that's okay. We weren't having a private conversation. We were just sharing our beliefs.

Sam: Well, I'm curious about some of the things you discussed.

Tom: Like what?

Sam: Like when you said you have Jesus in your heart. Were you referring to the Prophet who lived so long ago? If so, how can you possibly have Him in your heart?

Tom: Well, yes, I was referring to the Jesus of long ago. But He is alive now, and He has saved me.

Sam: What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible. And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

Tom: I guess they sound weird, but they really aren't. You see, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and His spirit lives in me.

Sam: Tom, I don't mean to be rude, but such things sound ludicrous to me. Hey, my phone's ringing and I'm expecting an important call. Maybe we can talk again later.

Sam asked some good questions. They deserved answers. But was Tom able to explain himself? He had a difficult time, didn't he? For example, the phrase, "I have Jesus in my heart" had become a cliché for Tom. He was able to converse with a fellow Christian with the assumption that they understood one another. But it was a different matter when a non-Christian expressed his curiosity about the conversation he had heard the previous day.

I have Jesus in my heart is one of several clichés we will consider. The goal of this article is to motivate Christians

to give attention to our conversations and see if you find clichés lurking there.

I Have Jesus in My Heart

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart*. As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

In the third chapter of Paul's Ephesian letter he prayed that his readers would "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . ." (Eph. 3:16-17, NASB). Galatians 2 contains one of the most powerful expressions of the indwelling Christ in Paul's life. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . ." (Gal. 2:20, NASB). In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asks, "do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5, NASB). These passages, and many more, serve to show that the New Testament affirms that Jesus indwells His followers. Thus it is important to stress that when someone says *I have Jesus in my heart* it has biblical merit. A problem arises, though, when we use this expression without attention to its profound message. When this happens we are using a cliché.

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to

understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 “the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing.”{2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted “that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God.”{3} In addition, we should realize that Paul’s favorite expression revolved around the phrase “in Christ.” This phrase “(or some cognate expression, such as “in the Lord,” “in Him,” etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul.”{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian’s life through the Spirit.

The second point of reference concerns the word *heart*. The Bible refers to the heart of man frequently. “The heart is the focus of mind, feeling, and will; it stands for the whole personality.”{5} Jesus is to “take up residence” in our whole personality. So when a Christian says *Jesus is in my heart* there is a literal implication. Jesus resides supernaturally in the believer through His Spirit. This is an astounding doctrine that indicates a transformed person! May our Lord lead us to continue sharing His presence in our lives by indicating that we understand truly what it means to say *I have Jesus in my heart*.

I Have Faith

Is a Christian the only person who has faith? Many Christians seem to think so. On many occasions I have played “the devil’s advocate” among Christian groups by asking them to describe and defend their beliefs. One of the most frequent responses I get is *I have faith*. When I hear this I usually retort by saying “So what? Do you think that because you are a Christian

you are given sole ownership of the idea?" After this I encourage them to think about the implications of the phrase. It is much more than a cliché.

All people, Christians and non-Christians, even atheists, exercise faith. That is, each day of our lives we apply faith in simple and profound ways. For example, you may take a pill of some kind today. That requires faith that the pill will help you rather than hurt you. If you travel on an airplane, that requires faith that you will arrive safely at your intended destination. Usually you don't even see the pilots until you have landed. These are everyday illustrations of faith. But just what does this word mean?

A major dictionary provides us with intriguing definitions. The first entry states that faith is "confidence or trust in a person or thing." The second entry says faith is "belief which is not based on proof." And then in the eighth entry the dictionary declares faith is "trust in God and in His promises as made through Christ by which man is justified or saved." {6} Obviously the eighth entry comes closest to a Christian understanding of faith. The first entry is also important to a Christian because it includes the idea of trust in a person. But it is the second entry that causes the most problem among Christians. Too many Christians use *I have faith* to mean they believe in something that is not based on proof. Unfortunately, this is when the phrase becomes a cliché.

For over 100 years, naturalism has been the dominant worldview in our culture. Among other things, this worldview bows at the altar of modern science to the extent that many believe that nothing can be true until it can be proven scientifically. Many Christians have been highly influenced by this concept. Thus they tend to say *I have faith* when they can't "prove" their beliefs in a scientific manner. This reaction is not legitimate within a Christian worldview. It is important to realize that even an atheistic scientist takes faith into the laboratory. There are facets of his own life that cannot be

“proven” scientifically. If he is married, he may say he loves his wife. Can that be proven scientifically?

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of “trust *in* a person or thing” (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already “proven” to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

The same is true for one who claims to be a Christian in our day. When we say we have faith, we should continue by declaring faith *in* the living God.

I’m Saved!

When you say *I’m saved!*, have you ever considered what someone may be thinking? People who hear you may have a number of questions. For example, they may ask why you are speaking in present tense. If you are saved now, does that mean you were actually saved at some point in the past? If so, does the present connect with the past in some way? Or they may want to know why you needed to be saved in the first place. Were you drowning and someone rescued you? Maybe they would even like to know if you are saved *for* something or someone. Proclaiming *I’m saved!* can be a strange expression if it is not explained. If someone asks for an explanation and we can’t respond, we may be guilty of using a cliché. We think we know what we mean, and our fellow Christians may think they know what is meant, but a lack of articulation implies a lack of understanding.

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When we say *I'm saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that *Jesus will save*, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . ."^{7} While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, "For my eyes have seen Thy salvation . . ." (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph's son was being called God's salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

Through these and numerous other verses we have a more complete picture of what *I'm saved!* entails. But there is a crucial question leaping from such passages. If sin creates the need for salvation, then what is it? To put it simply, when the Christian proclaims *I'm saved!* his hearers should understand that ". . . sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God"^{8} affecting everyone (Rom. 3:23). This is a crucial concept in contemporary culture that is generally misunderstood and rejected. In addition,

such alienation from God cannot be rectified by “rightdoing.” It can only be rectified through Jesus’ sacrificial payment for sin on the cross. I’m saved because of what Jesus did for me. In an amazing, life-changing way an event of the past brings salvation into the present. Praise God, we have been saved! Now we can live knowing salvation is in the present.

What Would Jesus Do?

What Would Jesus Do? is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. “The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins, paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD.”^{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

One of the more positive aspects of *What Would Jesus Do?* is that it can serve as a simple reminder of the Christian’s moral life. Surely each Christian has a perspective of Jesus that includes the moral perfection that permeated His earthly life. There is no greater model to emulate than Jesus. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15, NASB). The same writer tells us He “offered Himself without blemish to God . . .” (Heb. 9:14, NASB). Jesus was and is the only one who could make such an unblemished offering. So asking *What Would Jesus Do?*, whether audibly or inaudibly, can awaken us to our need for a moral model.

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask *What did* Jesus do? in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with “moral conflicts between obedience

toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22).”{10} More importantly, on the cross “he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind (the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . .”{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus’ disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples’ reaction after hearing Jesus’ teaching. He said, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were “amazed” at His words. Jesus continued by stating, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were “even more astonished” and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” (Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

The actions and words of Jesus and the reactions of the disciples remind us of the deity of Jesus. Think of this in present time. If Jesus physically walked beside you, would you always know what He was about to do? “Jesus is unique in his identity as the incarnate Son of God, and we should not assume that we could do or should do everything he did.”{12} Thus, caution is urged when we assume we always know what Jesus *would* do while we affirm what Jesus *did* do.

Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.

2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.
4. Ibid., 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, "Sin," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
9. Albert Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?", *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. Ibid.
12. Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About "WWJD", 6.