The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

Don Closson looks at the threat materialism poses to the church and proposes ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

One of the most popular rock songs of the seventies begins with the lyrics, “There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold and she’s buying a stairway to heaven.” The words, written by Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones of the group Led Zeppelin, reflects the fashionable message of anti-materialism that pervaded much of rock music in the late sixties and seventies. The notion of dropping out of the rat race and rejecting the corporate mentality of one’s parents formed the foundation of many a rock musician’s career. Today, one often hears people refer to the entire decade of the eighties as the “me decade” as if during that period of time Americans were somehow more self- centered and money hungry than during any that came before it. One popular newspaper framed the mindset with a poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub is watertight
That racquetball won’t get too tough
That all my sushi’s fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won’t lose its perks
My microwave won’t radiate
My condo won’t depreciate
I pray my health club doesn’t close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake

I pray my Volvo they won't take.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus' life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for money and things. He pleads with us to go beyond concerns for what we will consume and to seek our creator and His will. In Matthew 6:24-25 Jesus taught that "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"

In spite of the fact that materialism is apparently held in low regard by large segments of both popular and religious culture, surveys indicate that it influences the thinking of many Americans. In a recent survey, George Barna found that seventy-two percent of Americans believed that people are blessed by God so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, and fifty-eight percent agreed with the statement that the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment. Eighty-one percent believed that God helps those who help themselves. These responses point to the validity of what has been called our "therapeutic culture." The first commandment of this culture appears to be *do whatever makes you feel good, whatever helps you to cope materially.* When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment He responded by saying we are to love God (not things) with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:30, 31). That kind of love is self-denying and sacrificial.

In this article, I will look at the threat materialism poses to the church and propose ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

In his book *The Gospel and the American Dream*, Bruce Shelley tells the true story of a man who boasted to others that he would be a millionaire by age thirty-five. This young man was known as a really nice guy with a good sense of humor. He was considered bright, thoughtful, and generous to a fault. In 1984 he had acquired many of the appearances of success. He was flying to Dallas from Phoenix weekly on business. He drove a nice company car, and had moved his family into an exclusive neighborhood. He was also doing all the things that wealthy young men should do. He was the program chairman of the local Lions Club, president of the 200-member Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and a board member for the local Boys Club. However, on a Sunday in May 1985, the family missed church for the first time in months. The aspiring millionaire spent the day struggling in vain to scrape together enough cash to salvage his business, his image, and his pride. At 11:30 that night, after the family went to bed, he laid out his insurance policies and then went into the garage. He got into his expensive, company-provided BMW and turned on the ignition. He was dead within minutes.

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man’s real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a

few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

The two lives described here depict two different faith systems. The millionaire, claiming to have faith in the God of the Bible, ultimately had placed his faith in things. When he was in danger of losing them, he gave up on life itself. My friend who is renovating the old house is just about out of money. However, he is optimistic and excited about the ministry he is having in the lives of the students living there. He is aware of the financial difficulties that his dream presents, but he is trusting in God to provide even when good business sense may argue against it.

Could it be that many Christians have succumbed to the notion of rugged individualism, placing the building of an earthly empire above the building of God's kingdom? James 5:1-3 holds a severe warning for those tempted by wealth. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." God warns believers against placing their faith in things and treating people as expendable commodities.

The Sources of Materialism

In spite of both secular and religious messages against materialism in our culture, it still seems to have a great deal of influence on the lives of typical Americans. Why is this? I propose that there are two sources of materialism: philosophical materialism and functional materialism.

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the

matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think."{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, "We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality."{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

Survey after survey reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe that a God exists. If most Americans believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do they act like functional materialists? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? We could blame our modern society. The triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic components, often leaves little room for behavior motivated by a spiritual reality. However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

Every believer experiences a battle between the spirit and the

flesh. In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Further, he warns the Galatians that people whose lives are filled with selfish ambition and envy, among other things, will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is not saying that one will lose his or her salvation, but that a life consumed by materialistic desires is probably devoid of a spiritual dimension. If the Holy Spirit is not evident, there is no regeneration and no salvation.

Jesus’ ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of His ministry is highlighted by His experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt Him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the church, it is significant that at the beginning of Jesus’ short ministry He was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word *tempt* to mean “to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness.”{4} Jesus’ fasting in the desert provides His followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It also provides a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan’s testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan

suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

Satan's temptation is to reduce human nature to what might be called the *will to pleasure* principal, the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the *will to pleasure* view of human nature with a *will to meaning* view. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive. In his personal struggle to survive a Nazi concentration camp, the psychologist Victor Frankl discovered that when men lost meaning they quickly died. Mankind needs a transcendent reason to continue striving against the struggles that life presents. It is the Word of God that provides the only true foundation for this struggle.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for *instant status*. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but He would lose His integrity. Jesus responds by declaring that we are not to put God to the test. We are not to presume that God will accept our plans with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why

not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'” (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

A Cuban pastor recently attended a conference in Dallas and noticed how people here often say that they have no time. He said that people in Cuba have relatively few things but rarely run out of time. This brings to mind the idea of opportunity cost. This rule from economics tells us that if we spend our resources on one thing we cannot use them on another. If our focus is on things, and our time is spent buying, using, fixing, and replacing them, do we really have time to build the relationships with people necessary to communicating the Gospel?

In his book *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Dr. Gene Getz suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for believers to be in bondage to things; we cannot serve both things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and the book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians also have to constantly be on guard against self-deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the church at Laodicea imagined itself self-sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

How then do Christians avoid materialism? The apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God’s kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples not to be absorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:34).

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God’s will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, “all the believers were one in heart and mind”(Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God’s kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God

for the same today?

Notes

1. Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan: New York).
2. Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 61.
3. Israel Shenker, "The provocative progress of a pilgrim polymath," *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 128.
4. Graham H. Twelftree, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 821.>

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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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Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, The Death of Truth, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims,

“it’s just more difficult.” Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today’s postmoderns.

Xenos’ “Conversation and Cuisine” gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it’s not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include “To judge or not to judge,” “Forgiveness in relationships,” “Views of the afterlife,” and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide “OK” or “bad.” Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today’s “tolerate all viewpoints” mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler’s Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don’t always include a gospel presentation. They may be “pre-evangelistic”—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. “Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern,” claims McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God's Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God's truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter's New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother's death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

"The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers," Kellie recalls. "These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that." Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy ("Germ") Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him "great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ" plus "an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert)." Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at www.xenos.org.

Spreading the Passion

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and

apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

"Ephesians tells us to equip the church," he notes. "People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home." He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song's leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as "Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset." Monthly men's breakfasts may deal with "Evidences for the Resurrection" or "Is Jesus the Only Way?" New Song has also invited faculty from the International School of Theology to teach courses on "Developing a Christian World View" and other theological topics.

"I'm trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching," Haraksin explains. "As I identify them, I'm trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders."

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. "I had no idea how to respond to him," Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah's Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah's Witness members showed up at Jeff's door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. "I

was very uncomfortable at first," Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience "taught me why I believe what I believe," Jeff remembers. "Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn't have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively." He continues to apply what he's learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no interest.

"There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church," Haraksin notes. People want to know "Why can't I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?" Society is on information overload, and some "people don't want to take the time to read and study," which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus' deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song's "Jesus Under Fire" class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

"We're relational people in a relational culture," Haraksin notes. We're still learning." This product of his own church's equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity's truth. Sunday schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall's apologetics emphasis is "Issues and Answers," monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L'Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L'Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group

prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the "Issues and Answers" format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. "The idea," he explains, "was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that."

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals' crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

This article first appeared in the March/April 1999 issue of *Moody Magazine*.

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Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

Rick Wade provides a succinct summary of the persecution suffered by the early church in the first three centuries and how the church grew stronger as a result of this attention. He suggests that we should be prepared to face similar trials as our culture becomes less tolerant of true Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they *did* do and *didn't* do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"{3}

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.{4}

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly

superstition."{5} A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.{6}

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."{7}

Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.*Nero*

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.{8} But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.{9} In A.D. 62 his had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.{10} Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs,

their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."{11} Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since….A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.{14}

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.{15}

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.{16}Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?{17}

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.{18}

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch

and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."{20}

Hadrian

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant,{21} required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to use mere clamorous demands and outcries" as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians "merely for the sake of libelling [*sic*] them," the governor was to "proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt."{22} There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."{23} Philip Schaff tells us that "he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion."{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor ("the personal embodiment of the sovereign state"{25}). "It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,…Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as 'Lord.'"{26}

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.{27} After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.{28}

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.{29}

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians."{30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy….Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."{31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.{32} In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters.{33} "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil."{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina "strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ."{35} "At last," Schaff tells us, "the people grew weary of slaughter," and the persecutions died down.{36}

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."{37}

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.{42}

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few shorts years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.{43}

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions.{44} Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform.{45} Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death.{46} Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."{47} Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.{48} Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and

daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.{49}

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co- regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. “Christian churches were to be burned,” Schaff tells us, “all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death.”{50} A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, “and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine.”{51} As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: “All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed”{52} against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn’t disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians.{53} He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."{54} Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our worldview was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.{55} So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a "climate of hate." Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when

they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? "Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too." By God's grace we don't endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.{56}

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let's not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973),165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.

6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica,* "Nero," by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.
11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs,* trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.
32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.

35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
39. Schaff, 57.
40. Bruce, 179.
41. Schaff, 58.
42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.
43. Ibid., 60.
44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.
45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology,* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.
55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

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Reaching The World That Has Come to Us

World Missions in Perspective

What images or conceptions enter your mind when you hear the phrase *world missions*? Do you think of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests? Do you think of sparsely attended meetings featuring pictures of a world totally unrelated to your day-to-day life? Or does the phrase *world missions* evoke a sense of excitement and opportunity?

Though the phrase *world missions* never appears in Scripture, the concept of penetrating every culture in the world with the message of God's gracious provision through Christ, captures one of the most important themes of the Bible! From Genesis to Revelation, world missions is at the heart of God's purpose on earth.

Immediately following the record of God's judgment at Babel, which resulted in the division of the human race into diverse nations and cultures, we read of God's selection of Abram and his descendants as His special people. God promised to make of Abram's seed "a great nation" and to "make great their name" (Gen. 12:1-2). But He made it clear that beyond His intention to bless the children of Abram, God had a multicultural purpose in view: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was God's design that through Israel He might reach a world that had spurned His love.

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is found at the end of Matthew's Gospel; we call it the Great Commission. Among the final words of Jesus were his instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). And for the past two thousand years the church has been on a mission to

penetrate every culture with the message of God's grace. In this way we've filled the role of Abram's seed in bringing God's blessing to "all the families of the earth" by going into all the world with the gospel.

But what of the two millennia that have transpired between God's declaration to Abram of His multicultural purpose, and Jesus' pronouncement of the Great Commission? How did God fulfill His purpose to bless all nations before the church existed? He did it through His people, Israel. A hint is given, I believe, in a divine statement recorded by the prophet Ezekiel: "This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her" (Ezek. 5:5). A glance at a world map will reveal that God placed Israel at the crossroads of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. He could not have chosen a more strategic location through which to influence the entire world! As diplomats, merchants, and armies traversed the world, they inevitably passed through that tiny strip of land which God had deeded to Abram's seed!

When King Solomon offered his prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem, he included these words: "Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Thy people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Thy name's sake (for they will hear of Thy great name and Thy mighty hand, and of Thine outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear Thou in heaven…, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee…" (1 Kings 8:41-43).

For two thousand years at least, God's method for fulfilling His multicultural purpose, rather than sending His people to the nations of the world, was to bring the world to His people. The Great Commission, issued after two thousand years, reflected an adjustment in God's method. But as we shall see, it did not mark an end to His practice of bringing the world to His people, wherever they might be.

World Missions In Reverse

In the fifth chapter of Revelation we read of the vision of the throne of God granted to the apostle John, and of the heavenly worship of Christ. In the course of the vision, the apostle hears sung these words: “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). This heavenly anthem makes note of the fulfillment of a purpose which God declared nearly four thousand years ago, to extend his grace to every nation on earth.

This purpose has been fulfilled during the past two thousand years primarily through the response of faithful Christians to Jesus’ Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But as we discussed above, the Great Commission, rather than signaling the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s multicultural purpose, simply reflected an adjustment in God’s method of carrying it out. For centuries, God had been reaching out to a spiritually needy world not primarily by sending His people to the world, but by bringing the world to His people. He did it by placing His people Israel at the crossroads of three continents, with the intent of using their influence to draw the nations of the world to Himself.

To prepare them for this special assignment, God gave His people Israel some very specific instructions with regard to how they should conduct themselves toward these “alien visitors.” First, He said, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19 33-34a). International visitors were to receive a warm and loving welcome in Israel. This alone would make Israel unique among the nations of the world!

But second, they were to give the alien an opportunity to know God, through exposure to the Scriptures. In giving instructions concerning the reading of Scripture at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord said, “Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God” (Deut. 31:11-12).

What is of interest to us, however, is that even with the giving of the Great Commission to go into all the world with the gospel, God continued to bring the world to his people, wherever they might be.

This was evident, for instance, even on the day of Pentecost itself. As the Holy Spirit was giving birth to the church, it’s recorded in the book of Acts that “there were Jews living in Jerusalem…from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). At the church’s inception, God had brought the world to His people.

A while later we read that a man had come to Jerusalem to worship, who “was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure” (Acts 8:27). As he was returning to Ethiopia, he was intercepted by Philip, whom God had directed across his path. As the church was growing, God continued to bring the world to His people.

A bit later we read of “a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort” (Acts 10:1). Through a series of extraordinary circumstances, God led Peter to Cornelius’ house to explain to him the gospel through which he came to know Christ.

Throughout the church’s history, God has continued to fulfill His purpose to extend His grace to every nation, not only by sending His people to the world, but also by bringing the world to His people. And the instructions He gave to Israel

concerning their treatment of the international visitor are as valid for us today in our own situation as they were for them so many centuries ago!

The World at Our Doorstep

Most Christians have a sincere desire to be involved in the work of world missions, and faithfully pray for and contribute to those missions that God has laid on their hearts. Yet few of us realize that it's possible to be involved in the world's most exciting enterprise in an even more direct way, by befriending and ministering to the world of international students whom God has brought to us!

Every year approximately half a million students from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled in the colleges and universities of the U.S., more than in any other country! And I agree with Rev. Billy Graham when he said that the presence of these future world leaders constitutes one of the most strategic missions opportunities for the church today. Consider for a moment just a few facts about this group of international students.

First, more than half of these students generally come from countries that restrict or prohibit traditional Christian ministry within their borders. It's difficult to carry on the work of Christian ministry in countries like China, Malaysia, or Nepal. Yet each of these countries sends many students to the U.S. every year. In fact, approximately sixty percent of the international students in the U.S. come from what is known as the "10/40 Window." This is the group of countries located in the area between the 10th and 40th degree northern parallels, in which 90 percent of the world's "unreached peoples" reside! As one person has put it, "The door into these countries may be closed or barely open, but the door out is wide open!"

The second fact about these international students is that

they compose the pool from which many of the world's future leaders will emerge. Mark Hanna, in a talk delivered at Park Street Church in Boston in 1975, said that one-third to one-half of the world's top positions in politics, business, education and the military would be filled in the following twenty-five years by foreign students then attending colleges and universities in the United States.{1} How much more could this be true today! Consider this list of just a few of the scores of international leaders who received their college education in the U.S.: Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador studied at Notre Dame; Corazon Aquino studied at the College of Mount St. Vincent in New York; Ingvar Carlsson of Sweden studied at Northwestern; Andreas Papandreou of Greece studied at Harvard, as did King Birendra Bir Bikram Shad Dev of Nepal. As recently as 1987, some forty heads of state were educated in America.

Not only do many international students originate from countries that restrict Christian ministry, and not only are many of them destined to fill positions of leadership in their home countries, but while they are here they're generally more receptive to considering new ideas than they would be at home. And not only this, but these students are invariably in need of genuine friendship during their stay in the U.S.

Some time ago a study was done to determine the factors which contributed to the adjustment of international students to their stay in America. It was found that those who were best adjusted to their sojourn in the U.S. had two things in common. First, they had a close friend from their home country. And second, they had forged a close friendship with an American. Yet it was also found that no more than twenty percent of international students have such a friendship with an American, and fewer still have ever stepped foot inside an American home!

Students Among Us

In the 1950s a young man from Ethiopia came for military training to Aberdeen, Maryland. During the course of his stay, as the result of unfortunate experiences, he became embittered against America, and against the Christian faith. After his training here he returned to Ethiopia, and in 1974 participated as a key figure in the military coup which resulted in the establishment of a Marxist regime. Among his actions as head of state over the new government, were the launching of a campaign to root out "alien" religion in Ethiopia. In a speech to the nation, he named missionaries as the number one source of "imperialist infiltration" in Ethiopia. Many missionaries were expelled, and many national Christians were imprisoned. Churches were closed, and the formerly Christian radio station was converted into a voice for Marxist propaganda. The student's name was Mengistu Mariam.

About the time Mengistu was returning to Ethiopia, another student by the name of Tuisem Shishak arrived in Chicago from India, and later completed his Ph.D. in education at the State University of New York-Buffalo. While he was here Christian friends encouraged Tuisem in his faith, and encouraged him in his vision to return to India to establish a Christian college. In 1974 he did exactly that, founding Patkai Christian College, the first Christian liberal arts college in India. Since then, hundreds of graduates have entered India's society to fill positions of leadership in business, government, agriculture, the arts, and Christian ministry.

About the time Tuisem Shishak was returning to India, a Muslim student from Afghanistan arrived to study at an east coast university. In 1980 he received his Ph.D. in education. While he was here, as the result of being befriended by a Christian family, he came to faith in Christ. This student went on to translate Christian educational materials into his native

tongue of Dari, and to record gospel broadcasts transmitted into Afghanistan, Pakistan, and southern Russia.

A number of years ago, Hal Guffey (former president of International Students, Inc.) was speaking to a group of Christians about the opportunity to befriend international students. At the end of his talk a young lady from another country approached him. She told him that though her father had not become a Christian as a result of his student days in the U.S., nonetheless he had returned home with a favorable impression of Christians. Many years later he found himself in a position to decide whether Christian missionaries should be allowed to remain in his country. He decided they should be allowed to stay.

These are just a few of the thousands of similar stories that could be told about students who have come to America, and have returned to make a contribution in their home countries. While they were here, their attitudes toward the U.S. and toward American Christianity were indelibly shaped by their personal experiences. Some of them returned with an attitude that could be characterized as less than friendly. Others have returned with at least a positive impression of America and American Christians. And not a few have taken with them a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, as a result of their encounter with Christian friends.

Reaching Out

We've noted that at least half of these students come from countries that restrict or prohibit Christian ministry. We've also noted that at least 80 percent of these international students eventually return home, many of them to fill positions of leadership in their home countries—whether in business, education, government, or some other field. Some believe that as many as half of the world's future leaders are studying at American universities today.

We also recounted some of the stories of international students who have studied among us, and who returned home with attitudes that determined their future actions toward the work of Christ. Some returned to do much harm. Others returned, not only as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, but as effective leaders in Christian ministry in their own country.

In the case of the latter, God invariably used an American Christian who was willing to invest a little of his time in befriending and encouraging an international student in his pursuit of a relationship with God. In surveying international students who have come to know Christ during their stay in the U.S., two elements were voiced over and over again. The first was that they had enjoyed more than a merely surface relationship with a Christian friend. Someone had taken the initiative to express real love and concern to them, and had demonstrated a life of Christian integrity. Not that they had attempted to project an image of perfection or an impeccable spiritual life. But in some way a life of genuine love and faith had made an impact they could not forget. Several years ago, in the wake of the bloody incident at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, American Christians acted to assist students from China in the U.S. who had extraordinary needs. I remember one student who said in my presence, “You Christians really care about us, don’t you.” Another student who was from India stated publicly that though he had not yet become a Christian, nonetheless Christians had expressed the most genuine concern to him and he counted them as his closest friends. He has since come to faith in Christ.

The other element God used in drawing these students to Himself was a careful exposure to the Scriptures. In many cases, we may be surprised to learn that our international friend has never even opened a Bible before we invite him or her to study it with us. I recall one Chinese student who stated to me at the outset of a personal study, “This is my first exposure to the Bible.” Another student agreed to meet

over lunch once a week to study the Scriptures. He told me as we began our series of studies, “I’m open to God.” Several months later, after completing an overview of the life of Christ, I asked him who he believed Jesus Christ to be. He said to me, “Jesus is the Son of God. And He is my Savior.”

A number of years ago, a Muslim student from Jordan was studying at a major university in southern California. He was befriended by a Christian worker on his campus, who shared with him the message of the gospel. At first, this student said he was not interested. But over time, and as a result of this Christian’s consistent love toward this student, he came to know Jesus Christ in a personal way. Later, this student decided to attend an evangelical seminary here in the U.S., and eventually returned to found the first evangelical seminary in Jordan. What made the difference in this student’s life, and in the future of the church in Jordan? The faithful love and witness of one Christian in southern California.

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Notes

1. Lawson Lau, *The World at Your Doorstep* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13.

Resources

Andrews, Dick and Stacey Bieler. *China at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987.

Lau, Lawson. *The World at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

To learn more about ministry to international students, we

highly recommend that you write to International Students, Inc., requesting information on how to launch such a ministry in your home church (or just on a personal basis), and for a list of their published materials. You can contact them at:

International Students, Inc.
P.O. Box C
Colorado Springs, CO 80901
Phone: (719) 576-2700
http://www.isionline.org

Church's Intolerant Past Not a True Representation of Christianity

The Southern Baptist Convention recently made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raises a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place?

How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" become linked with human bondage, social apartheid and even today's racist militias?

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced

segregated schools, restrooms drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so I was saddened by the injustice I saw. A CBS documentary emphasized the Ku Klux Klan's use of the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in Durham, N. C. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their "longstanding policy of racial segregation." Thereafter, any Blacks present would be handed a note explaining the policy and asked not to return. I was outraged and left the church.

Some 19th-century ministers preached that slavery was a divine decree. In his book, "Slavery Ordained of God," Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God … to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family." Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom, with Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthening their journeys to bypass Samaria. Once, a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus, who as a Jew surprised people by freely mixing with Samaritans, told a now famous story: The Good Samaritan aided a badly injured Jewish traveler who had been ignored by two passers-by, Jewish religious leaders. Which of the three was the "neighbor"? Obviously, the one who showed mercy.

The power of true faith to reconcile enemies was driven home to me in the'70s by Norton, Georgia state leader of the Black Student Movement, and Bo, a prejudiced White church member. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and his

pals assaulted Norton. The animosity was mutual. Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed, while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo chose to reject his hypocrisy and follow his faith. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Historical and contemporary examples abound of true faith promoting reconciliation and opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, renounced his old ways, became a pastor and wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” Newton encouraged his Christian friend William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule, in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

In South Africa in 1988, my heart ached as I saw impoverished Black townships and inequality falsely justified by religion. I also saw signs of hope. At a multiracial university student conference, Peter, a white Afrikaner, told me, “All my life, I’ve been taught the races should be separate. But now because of my faith, I believe we can be one.”

Sadly, his efforts to convince his friends back home were frustrating. “Maybe, you can love the Black man,” they reluctantly conceded, “but you can’t associate with him.” Inner change often takes time and hinges on individual willingness.

Two years ago in Cape Town, radical Black terrorists sprayed a multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members’ reaction.

Lorenzo Smith’s wife, Myrtle, died from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. In spite of his loss, he

forgave the killers: “I prayed for those that committed the crime.” The pastor explained, “Christian forgiveness doesn’t mean that we condone what has happened or that we don’t wish the law to take its course, but that we have no desire for vengeance. We’re more determined than ever to contribute toward reconciliation and a peaceful future.”

Former Vermont Sen. George Aiken said that if one morning we awoke to discover everyone was the same race, color and creed, we’d find another cause for prejudice by noon. Human hearts need changing.

A young African-American woman heard a speech on this theme in her sociology class at North Carolina State University. “All my life I’ve been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people,” she noted. “Now, I realize those oppressors weren’t really following Christ.”

The Southern Baptists were right to renounce racism. Other institutions should take note. Racist policies, laws and yes—militias—need changing. But so do human beings. True Christianity does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it by changing human hearts.

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This article appeared in the *San Bernadino [CA] Sun*, July 30, 1995.

Apologetics and Evangelism

Probe’s founder Jimmy Williams, a master in classical apologetics, explores the use of apologetics in sharing the gospel.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Today as never before, Christians are being called upon to give reasons for the hope that is within them. Often in the evangelistic context seekers raise questions about the validity of the gospel message. Removing intellectual objections will not make one a Christian; a change of heart wrought by the Spirit is also necessary. But though intellectual activity is insufficient to bring another to Christ, it does not follow that it is also unnecessary. In this essay we will examine the place and purpose of apologetics in the sharing of our faith with others.

The word "apologetics" never actually appears in the Bible. But there is a verse which contains its meaning:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give *an answer* to every man who asketh you the reason for the hope that is within you with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15).

The Greek word *apologia* means "answer," or "reasonable defense." It does not mean to apologize, nor does it mean just to engage in intellectual dialogue. It means to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

The verse thus suggests that the *manner* in which one does apologetics is as important as the words expressed. And Peter tells us in this passage that Christians are to be ready *always* with answers for those who inquire of us concerning our faith. Most Christians have a great deal of study ahead of them before this verse will be a practical reality in their evangelistic efforts.

Another question that often comes up in a discussion about the merits and place of apologetics is, "What is the relationship of the mind to evangelism?" "Does the mind play any part in the process?" "What about the effects of the fall?" "Isn't man dead in trespasses and sins?" "Doesn't the Bible say we are to

know nothing among men except Jesus Christ and Him crucified?” “Why do we have to get involved at all in apologetics if the Spirit is the One Who actually brings about the New Birth?”

I think you will agree that today there are many Christians who are firmly convinced that answering the intellectual questions of unbelievers is an ineffectual waste of time. They feel that any involvement of the mind in the gospel interchange smacks too much of human effort and really just dilutes the Spirit’s work.

But Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance. If a real Reformation is to accompany the revival for which many of us pray, it must be something of the mind as well as the heart. It was Jesus who said, “Come and see.” He invites our scrutiny and investigation both before and after conversion.

We are to love God with the *mind* as well as the heart and the soul. In fact, the early church was powerful and successful because it out-thought and out-loved the ancient world. We are not doing either very well today.

Reasoning and Persuading

Most Christians today seem to prefer experiencing Christianity to thinking about or explaining it. But consider these verses:

Matthew 13:23: “But he who received the seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and *understands* it, who indeed bears fruit.” They all heard it, but only the “good soil” *comprehended* it.

Acts 8:30: “When the Spirit prompted Philip to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch (who was reading Isaiah 53), he asked, `Do you *understand* what you are reading?’ The eunuch replied, `How can I except some man should *guide* me?'”

Acts 18:4: Paul at Corinth was “reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath and trying to *persuade* the Jews and Greeks.”

Acts 19:8: Paul at Ephesus "entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, *reasoning* and *persuading* them about the kingdom of God."

Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by *hearing* and *hearing* by the word of God." Again the emphasis is on hearing with perception.

2 Corinthians 5:11: "We *persuade* men," says Paul. Vine's *Expository Dictionary* describes this Greek word like this: "to apply persuasion, to prevail upon or win over, bringing about a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations."

All of these words—persuasion, dialogue, discourse, dispute, argue, present evidence, reason with—are vehicles of communication and are at the heart of Paul's classical evangelistic model. Can there be saving faith without understanding? Can there be understanding without reasoning? The Bible would appear to say no. Paul urges believers in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed.

J. Gresham Machen, a great Christian scholar, said the following words in 1912 to a group of young men at Princeton Seminary:

> It would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well-prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power in connection with certain prior conditions for the reception of the Gospel. . . . I do not mean that the removal of intellectual objections will make a man a Christian. No conversion was ever wrought by argument. A change of heart is also necessary . . . but because the intellectual labor is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes He

> does. But He does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connections with certain conditions of the human mind. Usually He does not bring into the kingdom, entirely without preparation, those whose mind and fancy are completely contaminated by ideas which make the acceptance of the Gospel logically impossible.

If these words were true in 1912, how much more are they needed today?

Individual Responses

People respond to the gospel for various reasons—some out of pain or a crisis, others out of some emotional need such as loneliness, guilt, insecurity, etc. Some do so out of a fear of divine judgment. And coming to know Christ brings a process of healing and hope to the human experience. To know Christ is to find comfort for pain, acceptance for insecurity and low self-esteem, forgiveness for sin and guilt.

And others seem to have *intellectual* questions which block their openness to accept the credibility of the Christian message. These finally find in Christ the answers to their intellectual doubts and questions.

Those today who are actively involved in evangelism readily recognize the need for this kind of information to witness to certain people, and there are many more doubters and skeptics out there today than there were even twenty years ago.

We can see more clearly where we are as a culture by taking a good look at Paul’s world in the first century. Christianity’s early beginnings flourished in a Graeco-Roman culture more X-rated and brutal than our own. And we find Paul *adapting* his approach from group to group.

For instance, he expected certain things to be in place when he approached the Jewish communities and synagogues from town to town. He knew he would find a group which already had

certain beliefs which were not in contradiction to the gospel he preached. They were monotheists. They believed in one God. They also believed this God had spoken to them in their Scriptures and had given them absolute moral guidelines for behavior (the Ten Commandments).

But when Paul went to the Gentile community, he had no such expectations. There he knew he would be faced with a culture that was polytheistic (many gods), biblically ignorant, and living all kinds of perverted, wicked lifestyles. And on Mars Hill in Athens when he preached the gospel, he did somewhat modify his approach.

He spoke of God more in terms of His presence and power, and he even quoted truth from a Greek poet in order to connect with these "pagans" and get his point across: "We are God's offspring" (Acts 17:28).

One hundred years ago, the vast majority of Americans pretty much reflected the Jewish mentality, believing in God, having a basic respect for the Bible, and strong convictions about what was right and what was wrong.

That kind of American can still be found today in the 90s, but George Gallup says they aren't having much of an impact on the pagan, or Gentile community, which today holds few beliefs compatible with historic Christianity.

To evangelize such people, we have our work cut out for us. And we will have to use both our minds and our hearts to "become all things to all men in order to save some."

A Variety of Approaches

As we're considering how we as Christians can have an impact on our increasingly fragmented society, we need to keep in mind that many do not share our Christian view of the world, and some are openly hostile to it.

In fact, a college professor recently commented that he felt the greatest impediment to social progress right now was what he called the bigoted, dogmatic Christian community. That's you and me, folks.

If we could just "loosen up a little," and compromise on some issues, America would be a happier place. What is meant by this is not just a demand for tolerance . . . but wholesale acceptance of *any* person's lifestyle and personal choices!

But the Bible calls us to be "salt and light" in our world. How can we be that effectively?I don't have a total answer, but I'll tell you after 30+ years of active ministry what isn't working. And by my observation, far too many Christians are trying to address the horrendous issues of our day with one of three very ineffective approaches.

Defensive Approach – Many Christians out there are mainly asking the question, "How strong are our defenses?" "How high are our walls?" This barricade mentality has produced much of the Christian subculture. We have our own language, literature, heroes, music, customs, and educational systems. Of course, we need places of support and fellowship. But when Paul describes spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10, he actually *reverses* the picture. It is the *enemy* who is behind walls, inside strongholds of error and evil. And Paul depicts the Christians as those who should be mounting offensives at these walls to tear down the high things which have exalted themselves above the knowledge of God. We are to be *taking* ground, not just holding it.

Defeatist Approach – Other Christians have already given up. Things are so bad, they say, that my puny efforts won't change anything. "After all, we are living in the last days, and Jesus said that things would just get worse and worse." This may be true, but it may not be. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour of His coming. Martin Luther had the right idea when he said, "If Jesus were to come tomorrow,

I'd plant a tree today and pay my debts." The Lord may well be near, He could also tarry awhile. Since we don't know for sure, we should be seeking to prepare ourselves and our children to live for Him in the microchip world of the 21st century.

Devotional Approach – Other Christians are trying to say something about their faith, but sadly, they can only share their personal religious experience. It is true that Paul speaks of us as "epistles known and read" by all men. Our life/experience with Christ *is* a valid witness. But there are others out there in the culture with "changed" lives . . . and Jesus didn't do the changing! Evangelism today must be something more than "swapping" experiences. We must learn how to ground our faith in the facts of history and the claims of Christ. We must have others grapple with Jesus Christ, nor just our experience.

Apologetics and Evangelism

I want to conclude this essay with some very important principles to keep in mind if we want to be effective in seeing others come to know Christ through our individual witness.

1. Go to people. The heart of evangelism is Christians taking the initiative to actually go out and "fish for men." Acts 17:17 describes for us how Paul was effective in his day and time: "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."

2. Communicate with people. Engage them. Sharing the Gospel involves communication. People must be focused upon and then understand the Gospel to respond to it. It is our responsibility as Christians to make it as clear as possible for all who will listen. "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11).

3. Relate to people. Effective witness involves not only the transmission of biblical information; it also includes establishing a relationship with the other person. Hearts, as well as heads, must meet. “So, affectionately longing for you,” said Paul to the Thessalonians, “we were well pleased to import to you not only the good news of God, but also our own lives, because you have become dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8).

4. Remove barriers. Part of our responsibility involves having the skills to eliminate obstacles, real or imagined, which keep an individual from taking the Christian message seriously. When God sent the prophet Jeremiah forth, He said, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth . . . and I have ordained you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Sometimes our task as well is one of “spiritual demolition,” of removing the false so the seeds of truth can take root. Apologetics sometimes serves in that capacity, of preparing a highway for God in someone’s life.

5. Explain the gospel to others. We need an *army* of Christians today who can consistently and clearly present the message to as many people as possible. Luke says of Lydia, “The Lord opened her heart so that she heeded the things which were spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Four essential elements in sharing the gospel:

- someone talking (Paul)
- things spoken (gospel)
- someone listening (Lydia)
- the Lord opening the heart.

6. Invite others to receive Christ. We can be clear of presentation, but ineffective because we fail to give someone the opportunity and encouragement to take that first major step of faith. “Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we beg you in Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

7. Make every effort by every means to establish them in the faith. Stay with them, ground them in the Scripture, help them gain assurance of their salvation, and get them active in a vital fellowship/church.

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