

Spiritual Family Gatherings

This week (July 6, 2010) my husband and I are back in the Chicago area, where we both grew up. We're enjoying a few days with his family first, and then mine. Both of us are from large families; I'm #1 of seven children, he's #3 of six. Most of our siblings have children, and some have their own grandkids, which means a lot of people when we gather.

There are no intentional, earth-shaking conversations, but important conversations happen while we're just hanging out with each other. They're important because they solidify our connections with each other.

In our families, there's fun too. Different kinds of fun, since our family cultures are quite different. In my husband's family, we enjoy "the littles," being their charming toddler selves when they have sufficient sleep and food. (And we give grace when they're not so charming because they need a nap or a snack.) One of the things my family is looking forward to is a gig where my brother's terrific band is playing. He's a marvelous keyboardist and entertainer, and they cover other people's songs. It's fun to clap and sing and watch Brother Bill bounce and sway at the piano with an enormous amount of energy, rejoicing at the way he displays his giftings.

The reason we came up here is for a family reunion fueled by Facebook connections. Some of us have reconnected online, and it will be good to spend time face to face as adults for the first time. Others of us only see each other every few years at a wedding or funeral, and it will be such a blessing to just gather together simply to be together.

Family connections are different from any other. Blood relatives share genes and family history that have their own special kind of bonds. Cousins can enjoy a unique connection with each other that goes beyond same-age friends.

So often, God gives us earthbound experiences and illustrations to help us understand spiritual truths. When I think of the biblical injunction to “forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25), I think about how God wants us to connect with and enjoy our spiritual family the way we can enjoy our physical families.

When we hang out with our spiritual family, important conversations can happen simply because we’re together. There is fun to be had in these families, especially when people exercise the gifts God gave them.

There is certainly a different depth of connection with our spiritual family. We are blood relatives, because we are bound together by the blood of the Lord Jesus, Who bought us for Himself. We share spiritual DNA and the privilege of being family as well as friends.

And, at least in the cultures I am aware of, anywhere in the world, where the spiritual family gathers, there is always food. When we gather together, we should always remember why we are family, Whose family we are, and invite Him to the party. We can and should always remember the Lord whenever we break bread together, even if the bread is hot dog buns!

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The Time of Our Lives

In his song “Time in a Bottle,” Jim Croce sings about wishing he could capture and contain time so he could spend eternity

with the one he loved. But he laments that:

*There never seems to be enough time
To do the things you want to do
Once you find them*

You know the feeling. Our days get filled up with things that, upon reflection, don't seem to really matter much, leaving little time for things that are important. Rather than being a friend, time seems more like a foe; "more of a nemesis or taskmaster," says organizational coach Mark Freier.[\[1\]](#)

In the Middle Ages, time was measured primarily in periods within which people dwelt. Days were divided into rhythmic patterns: sunrise, breakfast time, work hours, evening, sunset. Hours were significant in relation to the daily cycle of prayers prescribed by the Church. But even in that case, there wasn't a concern with sticking to precise times of the day.

In the Middle Ages people weren't primarily concerned with time measured by the clock but with the quality of life's experiences.

As the West moved into modernity, clock time assumed greater importance. Now we worry, not only about hours, but about minutes. As a fund raising specialist told me, if you ask a businessman for ten minutes, take ten minutes and no more. His time is carefully apportioned out, and, as we have heard many times, time is money.

Busyness has become so routine that we easily feel guilty if we don't have anything we have to do. How can we "waste time" like that? But that's usually not a problem! The world outside has a way of filling up our daily planner even if we don't.

There are two ways to think about time I'd like to consider, designated by different words.

One is *chronos*. Chronos was the name given by the Greeks to the god who represented time. Chronos time is clock time. It is marked off by seconds, minutes, hours. Chronos is what I'm thinking about when I'm adding new things to my daily calendar. It's the measure of time I can give to one project or person before I must be moving on to the next item on the agenda.

The other word for time is *kairos*. Kairos was a child of Zeus. He represented opportunity. While chronos time is a quantitative thing, kairos is more qualitative; the concern is with the *what* that is to be done and the importance of doing it. Both are ways of measuring our experience in life, but they do so quite differently. Let's look at them more closely.

Two things help with understanding what kairos is. It speaks of the quality of our actions and of opportunity. Kairos time focuses on what we're doing (or planning to do) rather than the number of minutes or hours it will take. And it connotes the perfect time, the perfect moment, to do what needs to be done. It points to the significance of certain things. Success isn't measured by how many things we get done in a short amount of time, but by how well we've done the important things.

Theologian Daniel Clendenin uses Martin Luther King, Jr., and an example of someone who wanted to grasp the moment. Even though he knew his life had been threatened, he determined to press on with his work for civil rights. It was the time for that, even if King's chronos time might well be cut short very soon. And indeed it was. [\[2\]](#)

Winston Churchill provides another illustration. When things were going very badly for England in World War II, Churchill rallied the country to fight as hard as they could, because it was a time in which freedom could be lost by many, many people. The Nazis had to be defeated. It was the right time, in the sense of kairos. But even as kairos speaks of the

opportunity to do something great, it can also be fraught with danger.

Still one more illustration is the song by the Byrds, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, taken from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes:

*To everything / There is a season / And a time to every
purpose, under Heaven
A time to be born, a time to die / A time to plant, a time to
reap*

Notice the songwriter didn't say, "There's a time to plant, and that's at 6 a.m. on September 3. And we have eight hours to get it done." Even though farmers might set a day for everyone to gather and begin, that isn't the point of the song (or the Scripture). The time to plant is different from the time to harvest. When it's time to plant, nothing else will do but to plant.

Chronos and kairos are certainly connected, but they are qualitatively different. Kairos intersects chronos. It is within chronos time that we experience kairos. We can't have kairos without chronos, but we can have chronos without kairos.

Chronos time can often be made up, but that isn't so easy with kairos. I can find an open half hour block in my schedule tomorrow for that meeting I couldn't attend today. But can I get back that time I should have given a co-worker who's been going through tough times and really needed a listening ear? What matters with kairos isn't whether something fits in my schedule. What matters is, what matters! In kairos time, minutes aren't the measure of the value of our acts. The things we do, rather, grant value to the minutes they take. Mark Freier put it very well: "'To miscalculate kronos [{3}](#) is inconvenient. To miscalculate kairos is lamentable.'[{4}](#)

Kairos speaks of a quality of life that sees ourselves,

others, the world, as significant and worthy of our time, attention, energy, resources. Its enemies include pragmatism, doubts about our own significance, an absence of a long view of things, and, even more so, no eternal view—no understanding of what gives our lives eternal significance.

The old cry was “Carpe diem!” “Seize the day!” Someone might wonder, seize it for what? If nothing lasts, if nothing has eternal significance, what is the point? It all slips through our fingers and is gone. Seizing the day isn’t to be understood as the existentialist’s call to experience the moment. The focus on the latter is on fleeting experiences. The hope is that by focusing on those, one can shape one’s own life rather than living the life others hand you. But there’s nothing eternal about this. I am reminded of Meursault, the protagonist in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, who believes he lives in an indifferent world, or what *should* be an indifferent world, and wonders why people think anything is really significant. Nothing is of any more value than anything else because it all ends in death. The universe doesn’t care.

Which brings me to a specifically Christian view of time as kairos.

My search through the NT showed eighty uses of the word. It’s a significant concept in Scripture. The most familiar reference to kairos in the New Testament is probably Eph. 5:15-16: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” The King James used the more familiar phrase, “redeem the time.” It means literally to buy up, or rescue from loss, the opportunity, the proper season, the right time. The word kairos is also used in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. After Jesus resisted Satan, Luke writes that “he [Satan] left Him until an opportune time” (Lk. 4:13).

What gives significance to our time (and even to chronos time) is that we live in a world created by God who is working out

His plan that will be consummated at His appointed time. Theologian James Emery White wrote this: “Kairos moments are never pragmatic moves to ensure a blessed life during our short tenure on earth. They are moments to be seized for the sake of eternity and the Lord of eternity.”^{5} Good works have been prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10), and we should apply ourselves because they matter beyond the grave.

So, how do we do it? How does one live in kairos time in a world governed by chronos? Others want me to think of time the way they do, as openings in my schedule that can be filled with something else. I have responsibilities in my job and with my family and church that require keeping a calendar.

We aren't going to return to an agrarian society like that of the Middle Ages. And our lives *are* intertwined with others'. We *can*, however, do something about it. For starters, we can be more aware of how we use the time that *is* truly ours. Are we doing useful things? That doesn't mean to fill our time with “meaningful busyness.” There's a proper time for rest as well as for work, for creativity as well as for chores. Changing a mindset and habits takes practice. Little by little we can “re-color” our lives.

More significantly, however, is a fundamental change in our thinking about the importance of the things we do. Few of us will become Martin Luther Kings or Winston Churchills. But we—you and I—are important, and we touch the lives of important people. Not all kairos times have to be of society wide significance. The main point is that life and what we do with it, even in the details, is rich with significance and meaning. We can make a difference in this world, in others' lives, if we'll but seize the opportunities while they are present.

Notes

1. Mark Freier, [Whatif Enterprises](#).

2. Daniel Clendenin, ["When Chronos Meets Kairos, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2006."](#)
3. Alternate spelling for "chronos"
4. Freier.
5. James Emory White, *Life Defining Moments: Daily Choices with the Power to Transform Your Life* (Waterbrook Press, 2001), 97; quoted by Mark Freier.

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Four Views of Revelation

Dr. Patrick Zukeran presents a summary of four of the major approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation and its meaning for the end times: the idealist, the preterist, the historicist, and the futurist views. For each, he presents the basic approach, strengths of the approach and weaknesses of the approach. Recognizing that God is the central mover in all of these, he encourages us to keep these questions from dividing Christians in our mission of sharing Christ with the world.

The Debate

One of the most intriguing books of the Bible is the book of Revelation. The imagery of the cosmic battle in heaven and on earth makes it a fascinating book to study. However, much debate surrounds the proper interpretation of this apocalyptic work. Is this book a prophecy of future events yet to take place, or have the prophecies of this book been fulfilled?



Two popular authors highlight the debate that continues in our present time. In his hit series *Left Behind*, Tim LaHaye writes a fictional account based on his theological position that the events of Revelation will occur in the future. Popular radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff responded by attacking the theology of LaHaye. In his book *The Apocalypse Code*, Hanegraaff asserts that the events of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. He criticizes theologians like LaHaye for taking a hyper-literal approach to Revelation.^[1] The debate has raised some confusion among Christians as to why there is such a debate and how we should interpret the book of Revelation.

The issues at the core of the debate between Hanegraaff and LaHaye are not new. Throughout church history, there have been four different views regarding the book of Revelation: idealist, preterist, historicist, and futurist. The idealist view teaches that Revelation describes in symbolic language the battle throughout the ages between God and Satan and good against evil. The preterist view teaches that the events recorded in the book of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. The historicist view teaches that the book of Revelation is a symbolic presentation of church history beginning in the first century AD through the end of age. The prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled in various historic events such as the fall of the Roman Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution. The futurist view teaches that Revelation prophesies events that will take place in the future. These events include the rapture of the church, seven years of tribulation, and a millennial rule of Christ upon the earth.

Each view attempts to interpret Revelation according to the laws of hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation. This is central to the debate about how we should approach and interpret Revelation. The idealist approach believes that apocalyptic literature like Revelation should be interpreted

allegorically. The preterist and historicist views are similar in some ways to the allegorical method, but it is more accurate to say preterists and historicists view Revelation as symbolic history. The preterist views Revelation as a symbolic presentation of events that occurred in AD 70, while the historicist school views the events as symbolic of all Western church history. The futurist school believes Revelation should be interpreted literally. In other words, the events of Revelation are to occur at a future time.

The goal of this work is to present a brief overview of the four views of Revelation and present the strengths of each view as well as its weaknesses. It is my hope that the reader will gain a basic understanding and be able to understand the debate among theologians today.

The Idealist View

The first view of Revelation is the idealist view, or the spiritual view. This view uses the allegorical method to interpret the Book of Revelation. The allegorical approach to Revelation was introduced by ancient church father Origen (AD 185-254) and made prominent by Augustine (AD 354-420). According to this view, the events of Revelation are not tied to specific historical events. The imagery of the book symbolically presents the ongoing struggle throughout the ages of God against Satan and good against evil. In this struggle, the saints are persecuted and martyred by the forces of evil but will one day receive their vindication. In the end, God is victorious, and His sovereignty is displayed throughout ages. Robert Mounce summarizes the idealist view stating, "Revelation is a theological poem presenting the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a philosophy of history wherein Christian forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil."[2](#)

In his commentary on Revelation, late nineteenth century

scholar William Milligan stated, "While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents; we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, both for the exhibition of the principles which govern the history of both the world and the Church."[\[3\]](#)

The symbols in Revelation are not tied to specific events but point to themes throughout church history. The battles in Revelation are viewed as spiritual warfare manifested in the persecution of Christians or wars in general that have occurred in history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically-inspired political opposition to the church in any age. The beast from the land represents pagan, or corrupt, religion to Christianity. The harlot represents the compromised church, or the seduction of the world in general. Each seal, trumpet, or bowl represents natural disasters, wars, famines, and the like which occur as God works out His plan in history. Catastrophes represent God's displeasure with sinful man; however, sinful mankind goes through these catastrophes while still refusing to turn and repent. God ultimately triumphs in the end.

The strength of this view is that it avoids the problem of harmonizing passages with events in history. It also makes the book of Revelation applicable and relevant for all periods of church history.[\[4\]](#)

However, there are several weaknesses of this view. First, this view denies the book of Revelation any specific historical fulfillment. The symbols portray the ever-present conflict but no necessary consummation of the historical process.[\[5\]](#) Rev.1:1 states that the events will come to pass shortly, giving the impression that John is prophesying future historical events.

Second, reading spiritual meanings into the text could lead to

arbitrary interpretations. Followers of this approach have often allowed the cultural and socio-political factors of their time to influence their interpretation rather than seeking the author's intended meaning.[{6}](#) Merrill Tenney states,

The idealist view . . . assumes a "spiritual" interpretation, and allows no concrete significance whatever to figures that it employs. According to this viewpoint they are not merely symbolic of events and persons, as the historicist view contends; they are only abstract symbols of good and evil. They may be attached to any time or place, but like the characters of Pilgrim's Progress, represent qualities or trends. In interpretation, the Apocalypse may thus mean anything or nothing according to the whim of the interpreter.[{7}](#)

Unless interpreters are grounded in the grammatical, historical, and contextual method of hermeneutics, they leave themselves open to alternate interpretations that may even contradict the author's intended meaning.

The Preterist View

The second view is called the [preterist](#) view. *Preter*, which means "past," is derived from the Latin. There are two major views among preterists: full preterism and partial preterism. Both views believe that the prophecies of the Olivet discourse of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled in the first century with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Chapters 1-3 describe the conditions in the seven churches of Asia Minor prior to the Jewish war (AD 66-70). The remaining chapters of Revelation and Jesus' Olivet Discourse describe the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.

Full preterists believe that all the prophecies found in Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 and that we are now living

in the eternal state, or the new heavens and the new earth. Partial preterists believe that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but that chapters 20-22 point to future events such as a future resurrection of believers and return of Christ to the earth. Partial preterists view full preterism as heretical since it denies the second coming of Christ and teaches an unorthodox view of the resurrection.

Church historians trace the roots of preterism to Jesuit priest Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613).[{8}](#) Alcazar's interpretation is considered a response to the Protestant historicist interpretation of Revelation that identified the Pope as the Anti-Christ. However, some preterists contend that preterist teachings are found in the writings of the early church as early as the fourth century AD.[{9}](#)

Crucial to the preterist view is the date of Revelation. Since it is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preterists hold to a pre-AD 70 date of writing. According to this view, John was writing specifically to the church of his day and had only its situation in mind. This letter was written to encourage the saints to persevere under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Preterists point to several reasons to support their view. First, Jesus stated at the end of the Olivet Discourse, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34). A generation usually refers to forty years. The fall of Jerusalem would then fit the time Jesus predicted. Second, Josephus' detailed record of the fall of Jerusalem appears in several ways to match the symbolism of Revelation. Finally, this view would be directly relevant to John's readers of his day.

There are several criticisms of this view. First, the events described in Jesus' Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 4-19 differ in several ways from the fall of Jerusalem.

One example is that Christ described his return to Jerusalem this way: “[A]s lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Mt. 24:27). Preterists believe this refers to the Roman army’s advance on Jerusalem. However, the Roman army advanced on Jerusalem from west to east, and their assault was not as a quick lightning strike. The Jewish war lasted for several years before Jerusalem was besieged, and the city fell after a lengthy siege.^{10} Second, General Titus did not set up an “abomination of desolation” (Mt. 24:15) in the Jerusalem Temple. Rather, he destroyed the Temple and burned it to the ground. Thus, it appears the preterist is required to allegorize or stretch the metaphors and symbols in order to find fulfillment of the prophecies in the fall of Jerusalem.

Another example of allegorical interpretation by preterists is their interpretation of Revelation 7:4. John identifies a special group of prophets: the 144,000 from the “tribes of Israel.” Preterist Hanegraaff states that this group represents the true bride of Christ and is referred to in Rev. 7:9 as the “great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language.” In other words, the 144,000 in verse 4, and the great multitude in verse 9 are the same people.^{11} This appears to go against the context of the chapter for several reasons. First, throughout the Bible the phrase “tribes of Israel” refers to literal Jews. Second, John says there are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a strange way to describe the multitude of believers from all nations. Finally, the context shows John is speaking of two different groups: one on the earth (the 144,000 referenced in 7:1-3), and the great multitude in heaven before the throne (7:9). Here Hanegraaff appears to be allegorizing the text.

Robert Mounce states,

The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the

Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign on God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so helplessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray. [{12}](#)

Mounce and other New Testament scholars believe the preterists' interpretations are not consistent and utilize allegorical interpretations to make passages fit their theological view.

Second, the preterist position rests on a pre-AD 70 date of writing. However, most New Testament scholars date the writing of the book to AD 95. If John had written Revelation after AD 70, the book could not have been a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem. This presents a significant argument against the preterist position.

Preterists point to several lines of evidence for a pre-AD 70 date of writing. First, John does not mention the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. If he had been writing two decades after the event, it seems strange that he never mentioned this catastrophic event. Second, John does not refer to either Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21) or the fulfillment of this prophecy. Third, in Revelation 11:1, John is told to "measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there." Preterist argue that this indicates that the Temple is still standing during the writing of Revelation. [{13}](#)

The preterist view, particularly the partial preterist view, is a prominent position held by such notable scholars as R. C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff, Kenneth Gentry, and the late David Chilton (who later converted to full preterism after the publishing of his books).

The Historicist View

The third view is called the historicist approach. This view teaches that Revelation is a symbolic representation that presents the course of history from the apostle's life through the end of the age. The symbols in the apocalypse correspond to events in the history of Western Europe, including various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and rulers such as Charlemagne. Most interpreters place the events of their day in the later chapters of Revelation.

Many adherents of this position view chapters 1-3 as seven periods in church history. The breaking of the seals in chapters 4-7 symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The Trumpet judgments in chapters 8-10 represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. Among Protestant historicists of the Reformation, the antichrist in Revelation was believed to be the papacy. Chapters 11-13 in Revelation represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism. The bowl judgments of Revelation 14-16 represent God's judgment on the Catholic Church, culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism depicted in chapters 17-19.[\[14\]](#)

There are several criticisms of this approach. First, this approach allows for a wide variety of interpretations. Adherents have a tendency to interpret the text through the context of their period. Thus, many saw the climax of the book happening in their generation. John Walvoord points out the lack of agreement among historicists. He states, "As many as fifty different interpretations of the book of Revelation therefore evolve, depending on the time and circumstances of the expositor."[\[15\]](#) Moses Stuart echoed the same concern in his writings over a century ago. He wrote, "Hitherto, scarcely any two original and independent expositors have agreed, in respect to some points very important in their bearing upon the interpretation of the book."[\[16\]](#)

Second, this view focuses mostly on the events of the church in Western Europe and says very little about the church in the East. Thus, its narrow scope fails to account for God's activity throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Finally, this view would have little significance for the church of the first century whom John was addressing. It is unlikely they would have been able to interpret Revelation as the historical approach suggests.

Prominent scholars who held this view include John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. This view rose to popularity during the Protestant Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has declined in popularity and influence.

The Futurist View

The fourth view is the futurist view. This view teaches that the events of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation chapters 4-22 will occur in the future. Futurists divide the book of Revelation into three sections as indicated in 1:19: "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." Chapter 1 describes the past ("what you have seen"), chapters 2-3 describe the present ("what is now"), and the rest of the book describes future events ("what will take place later").

Futurists apply a literal approach to interpreting Revelation. Chapters 4-19 refer to a period known as the seven-year tribulation (Dan. 9:27). During this time, God's judgments are actually poured out upon mankind as they are revealed in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 13 describes a literal future world empire headed by a political and religious leader represented by the two beasts. Chapter 17 pictures a harlot

who represents the church in apostasy. Chapter 19 refers to Christ's second coming and the battle of Armageddon followed by a literal thousand-year rule of Christ upon the earth in chapter 20. Chapters 21-22 are events that follow the millennium: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the arrival of the heavenly city upon the earth.

Futurists argue that a consistently literal or plain interpretation is to be applied in understanding the book of Revelation. Literal interpretation of the Bible means to explain the original sense, or meaning, of the Bible according to the normal customary usage of its language. This means applying the rules of grammar, staying consistent with the historical framework, and the context of the writing. Literal interpretation does not discount figurative or symbolic language. Futurists teach that prophecies using symbolic language are also to be normally interpreted according to the laws of language. J. P. Lange stated,

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted – that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.[{17}](#)

Charles Ryrie also states,

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.[{18}](#)

Futurists acknowledge the use of figures and symbols. When figurative language is used, one must look at the context to find the meaning. However, figurative language does not justify allegorical interpretation.

Futurists contend that the literal interpretation of Revelation finds its roots in the ancient church fathers. Elements of this teaching, such as a future millennial kingdom, are found in the writings of Clement of Rome (AD 96), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), Irenaeus (AD 115-202), Tertullian (AD 150-225) and others. Futurists hold that the church fathers taught a literal interpretation of Revelation until Origen (AD 185-254) introduced allegorical interpretation. This then became the popular form of interpretation when taught by Augustine (AD 354-430).[\[19\]](#) Literal interpretation of Revelation remained throughout the history of the church and rose again to prominence in the modern era.

The futurist view is widely popular among evangelical Christians today. One of the most popular versions on futurist teaching is dispensational theology, promoted by schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute. Theologians such as Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Dwight Pentecost are noted scholars of this position. Tim LaHaye made this theology popular in the culture with his end times series of novels.

Unfortunately, there have been and continue to be popular preachers who mistakenly apply the futurist approach to connect current events to the symbols in Revelation. Some have even been involved in setting dates of Christ's return. Although their writings have been popular, they do not represent a Biblical futurist view.

Critics of this view argue that the futurist view renders the book irrelevant to the original readers of the first century. Another criticism is that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and thus meant to be interpreted allegorically or symbolically

rather than literally. Hank Hanegraaff states, "Thus, when a Biblical writer uses a symbol or an allegory, we do violence to his intentions if we interpret it in a strictly literal manner."[\[20\]](#)

One of the key elements in the debate, particularly between preterists and futurists, is the date of writing for Revelation. Preterists argue for a pre-AD 70 date while futurists hold to a date of AD 95. There are several reasons for the later date. First, Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, states that John wrote Revelation at the end of Emperor Domitian's reign, which ended in AD 96. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. He thus had a connection with a contemporary of the Apostle John.

Second, the conditions of the seven churches in Revelation appear to describe a second-generation church setting rather than that of a first-generation. For example, the Church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7) is charged with abandoning their first love and warned of the Nicolaitan heresy. If John had written Revelation in AD 65, it would have overlapped with Paul's letter to the Ephesians and Timothy. However, Paul makes no mention of either the loss of first love or the threat of the Nicolaitans. Ephesus was Paul's headquarters for three years, and Apollos served there along with Aquila and Priscilla. The church of Smyrna did not exist during Paul's ministry (AD 60-64) as recorded by Polycarp, the first bishop of the city. Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22) is rebuked for being wealthy and lukewarm. However, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul commends the church three times (2:2, 4:13, 16). It would likely take more than three years for the church to decline to the point that chapter 3 would state there to be no commendable aspect about it. Also, an earthquake in AD 61 left the city in ruins for many years. Thus, it is unlikely that in a ruined condition John would describe them as rich.

Preterists who favor the AD 70 date pose the question, "Why

doesn't John mention the fall of the Temple which occurred in AD 70?" Futurists respond that John wrote about future events, and the destruction of the temple was twenty-five years in the past. He also wrote to a Gentile audience in Asia Minor which was far removed from Jerusalem. Preterists also point to the fact that the Temple is mentioned in chapter eleven. Futurists respond that although John mentions a temple in Revelation 11:1-2, this does not mean it exists at the time of his writing. In Daniel 9:26-27 and Ezekiel 40-48, both prophets describe the temple, but it was not in existence when they described a future temple in their writings.

What did Jesus mean in Matthew 24:34 when He said, "[T]his generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened"? The common futurist response is that Jesus was stating that the future generation about which he was speaking would not pass away once "these things" had begun. In other words, the generation living amid the time of the events He predicted will not pass away until all is fulfilled.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a fascinating book, and the debate regarding its interpretation will continue. Despite our various views, there are some common threads upon which Christians agree.^{21} All views believe that God is sovereign and in charge of all that occurs in history and its ultimate conclusion. Except for full preterism and some forms of idealism, all believe in the physical second coming of Christ. All views believe in the resurrection from the dead. All believe there will be a future judgment. All believe in an eternal state in which believers will be with God, and unbelievers will be separated from Him. All agree upon the importance of the study of prophecy and its edification for the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, the debate among Christians has often been harsh and hostile. It is my hope that the debate would

continue in a cordial, respectful manner which will challenge every believer to accurately study and interpret the Word. We all await the return of our Lord and together with the saints of all ages say, "Amen, come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)

Notes

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18. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.
20. Hanegraaff, 14.
21. Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Conviction Without Compromise* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 333.

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Cross Cultural Apologetics in Uganda

For any speaker, cross-cultural teaching is challenging. So when Pat Zukeran and I were asked to participate in two pastors' training conferences in Uganda, Africa, my prayer life took on a new urgency. Although the official language of Uganda is English, most of its citizens use one of twenty-nine other languages. Uganda is mostly an agricultural society and

is somewhat isolated from the Western media. A majority of the pastors had received only a limited education, and would be fortunate to own a Bible much less have books for a theological library. Pat and I realized we would have to adjust the way we normally present our lessons to incorporate word pictures and stories to help the Ugandan translators effectively communicate our messages with this specialized audience.

However, a more central question was whether or not these pastors felt a need for the kind of apologetics information that Probe usually provides. Did they care about arguments for the authority of Scripture or the deity of Christ? Was maintaining a Christian worldview something they would understand or even be interested in? Would defenses against religious pluralism, Mormonism, and Islam be wanted or deemed unnecessary? I fervently prayed for wisdom and discernment as we made our preparations. Thankfully when it came time to go, I experienced a peace as I stepped out in faith. The Lord was sending us and I was eager to see how He would accomplish His plan for the Ugandan pastors!

Our time in Uganda was split into two one-week conferences. The first conference was near the town of Jinja, not far from the country's eastern border with Kenya. This town is on the shores of Lake Victoria, near the headwaters of the Nile River. Our actual conference location was a 30 minute van ride to what we later discovered was the first church in Uganda, built in the 1880s by the Anglicans. Most of the attendees were lay pastors in area churches along with a few priests. We later discovered that the Anglican priests were responsible for as many as twenty churches and spent most of their time marrying, baptizing, and burying members. Much of the work of evangelizing and mentoring new believers fell upon the lay workers. As a result, this group of 125 workers was essential to energizing and equipping the Anglican movement in the region.

Pat opened the conference with a great session on the biblical mandate to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have in Christ. Some of the pastors admitted that they had never really thought about having to defend what they believe. They would share with their neighbors that they believed about Jesus, but they didn't even think about defending the faith if questions or objections arose. We later discovered that Jinja was the center of Mormon activities in Uganda. The pastors were shocked to hear what Mormons believe concerning the nature of God and specifically the person of Christ. They also responded positively to arguments against religious pluralism acknowledging that they were hearing them for the first time.

For the next leg of the trip, we headed out to Fort Portal to partner with ALARM Ministries on the western border of Uganda next to the Congo. We had received an e-mail from both the Ugandan government and our state department warning us about the ongoing conflict in the Congo. Fortunately, the fighting had not spilled over into Uganda. Other than refugees entering into the country we did not notice any problems.

It turns out that the group of pastors in Fort Portal was especially passionate about the apologetics material Pat and I covered during the six hours each day. They were experiencing a direct challenge



from Islam and had little information with which to respond. Many of them felt the burden to defend their faith from the rising influx of money and mosques from Libya. Libya's ruler

Muammar Kaddafi has taken an interest in Uganda. In Fort Portal he has built a large, gold-domed mosque and a mansion for the local fifteen-year-old tribal king. Local Muslims have been targeting pastors and their sons by offering money and even cars to those who would convert to Islam. Sadly, some have done so.

In response, Pat and I decided to change our scheduled topics to make the last day entirely focused on Islam. I did a session on the history of the religion and its basic beliefs while Pat covered apologetic strategies to use when talking with a Muslim. At the end, one pastor jumped to his feet and began shouting in the local dialect. We wondered what we might have said to upset him and looked to the translator. Translated he said,

“For years the Muslims have challenged us and we’ve never been able to answer their challenges. Today, our teachers have provided answers and addressed the issues they bring up. Now for the first time I feel we are equipped to answer them when they come for their crusades here in Fort Portal!”

Another pastor agreed with him and stood up to say,

“For too long we have given bad answers or just beat around the bush. Now we can provide solid answers!”

Then a third pastor exclaimed,

“After receiving my new Bible (given to them by the mission trip funds) and hearing the teaching today, I love God’s Word more than ever!”



With that, they began celebrating by raising their new Bibles above their heads, dancing and singing a song titled, "Heaven and earth will pass away but God's Word will endure forever." It was a very moving for us to see the joy in their hearts

because of our teaching.

Our other material also connected as well. I spoke about temptations all Christians experience when life becomes difficult. We in the U.S. tend to trust in our wealth, technology, and entertainment when we should be turning to God for strength and endurance. In Africa, the tendency is to revert to the traditional African religions that include local witch doctors and ancestor worship. We had a number of good discussions about trusting only in God and the truth revealed in Scripture rather than in other belief systems and unbiblical practices.

Our time in Uganda reconfirmed the need for apologetics regardless of location and culture. Although the challenges may be different, Christians everywhere need to have confidence in the gospel message if they are going to take it into the world. It is our prayer that we left our brothers and sisters in Uganda with tools that will equip them to be more effective ambassadors for Christ.

Gabriel's Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

An article in *TIME* magazine titled "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" opened with the statement, "A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed 'Gabriel's Vision' could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection."[\[1\]](#) What exactly is this tablet and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

About a decade ago a stone tablet about three feet in height owned by a Swiss-Israeli antiques collector received the attention of historians. This tablet contained eighty-seven lines in Hebrew text written, not engraved, on the stone. Experts date the tablet to the late first century B.C. or a little later. The origin of the tablet is unknown. Some surmise that it came from the Transjordan region and other scholars think this may have been a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection.

The tablet contains an apocalyptic prediction of the end of the world spoken by a person named Gabriel. Other scholars believe the name refers to the angel Gabriel. There are several parts of the message that are missing or difficult to decipher.

The connection to the resurrection of Christ is found in line 80. Jewish scholar Israel Kohl, an expert in Talmudic and biblical languages at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, believes that the line begins with the words "In three days" and includes some form of the verb "to live."[\[2\]](#) He believes that this text refers to a first century Jewish rebel named Simon who was killed by the Romans in 4 B.C. Kohl believes the translation reads, "In three days, you shall live. I Gabriel

command you.”[\[3\]](#)

Time magazine writer David Van Biema writes that if Kohl’s translation is correct, it would somehow undermine the historicity of resurrection. He states,

This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told TIME, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a “dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism,” he says. “But for the first time, we have proof that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus.” If so, he goes on, “this should shake our basic view of Christianity. ... What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story.”[\[4\]](#)

Biema states that one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection was that it was a unique concept introduced by Christianity. The belief in the resurrection is based on “faith.” The defense Christians gave for the resurrection is that it was not believed by the Jews and therefore could not have been made up by the Christians. This discovery would then undermine one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection of Christ.

What implications does this discovery have, and is it a devastating blow to the resurrection as Biema asserts? First, Kohl contends that the words of line 80 should be translated as, “In three days you shall live.” But the exact words of that line are not known. Hebrew scholars remain uncertain regarding line 80 because in crucial places there are a lot of

missing words. The Israeli scholar who first worked on the tablet is Ada Yardeni. Yardeni's translation of the text shows indeed there are key words missing. The English translation reads, "...from before You, the three si[gn]s(?), three ...[...](line 79). In three days ..., I, Gabri'el ...[?], (line 80).[{5}](#) Yardeni considers the words in line 80 to be indecipherable.[{6}](#)

Church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Kohl translates as rise could also mean "there arose." So, instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah.[{7}](#) Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text is speaking of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

Second, I do not find this discovery a threat to the resurrection. Even if Kohl's translation is correct, it does not affect the evidence for and the teaching on the resurrection. If Kohl's translation is correct, it would highlight the debate in Jewish belief regarding the Messiah. The popular notion was teaching of a Davidic Messiah who would overthrow the nation's enemies and establish the Davidic Kingdom. However, some Jewish schools although a minority, held to a belief in a suffering Messiah. If Kohl's translation is correct, this tablet would show this suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

This would not pose a major threat to Christianity. Many Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few people are recorded being raised from the dead in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it should not be so surprising if there was a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah held by a minority of Jews.

Finally, Biema states that the "novelty" of the resurrection

is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. He also states that Christians' belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." I would disagree with Biema's assertions. First, the historicity of the resurrection is not based on "faith" or belief without credible reasons. The belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. Second, I do not believe the novelty of the resurrection is one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely if ever have used it in an apologetic presentation. I believe the strongest arguments come from the historical evidence.

What are those evidences? First, the Gospels represent an accurate historical account of the life of Christ written in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels (See my article on [The Historical Reliability of the Gospels.](#))

In studying the resurrection, there are several facts agreed upon by historians of various persuasions. First, the tomb of Christ was known and was found empty. Second, there is the transformation of the Apostles from cowards to men who boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the face of their enemies. Third, the preaching of the Resurrection originates in Jerusalem, the most hostile place to preach such a message. Fourth, we have a massive Jewish societal transformation. Thousands of Jews abandon key tenets of Jewish faith and accept the teachings of Christ. Fifth, the origin of the church was built on the proclamation of the resurrection. Any explanation of the empty tomb must account for these facts, and the resurrection remains the most reasonable explanation. All other attempts have failed as alternative explanations (See my article [Resurrection: Fact or Fiction.](#))

These remain the strongest arguments for the resurrection, not the novelty of a resurrected Messiah. Even if Kohl's

translation is proven to be correct, it does not affect any of these facts. There is still compelling evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Kohl's translation would highlight the controversy among pre-Christian Jews regarding the two concepts of the coming Messiah. His translation would simply add the idea that the minority view regarding the suffering Messiah included a belief by some Jews in a Messiah who would die and resurrect three days later.

Notes

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Biblical Perspective on Giving – Giving Cheerfully

and Sacrificially

Kerby Anderson provides a balanced, biblical perspective on how we should approach giving as Christians. One key point stressed from the book of 1st Corinthians is that God loves a cheerful giver and He honors those who give beyond their perceived ability. Read this article with an open heart asking God for His guidance on your giving habits.

The Controversy

In this article we are going to be talking about a biblical perspective on giving. In the past, we have discussed biblical principles concerning spending and focused primarily on the subject of [debt and credit](#).^{1} Here we will discuss such issues as the Old Testament tithe, New Testament giving, and related questions that often surface in the minds of Christians.

At the outset, we should acknowledge that there is some controversy surrounding a biblical perspective of giving. For example, if you ask if a Christian should tithe, you will get very different answers from various members in the body of Christ.

In fact, asking the question in some churches today is likely to start an argument. A few months ago, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article entitled *The Backlash Against Tithing*.^{2} More recently CBS News ran a feature, *To Tithe or Not To Tithe?*^{3} Even the secular media is noticing how controversial tithing has become in some churches.

The idea that Christians should give ten percent of their income to the church has become quite controversial and is increasingly being challenged. Church members say they should be free to donate whatever they choose. Some are reacting against a strong promotion of church giving that includes

sermons, flyers, and brochures. Some balk at churches that have set up giving kiosks where church members can give using their debit cards. They have called them Gods ATM machines.

Others are reacting to the legalism that says the Old Testament law code concerning the tithe applies to the New Testament church age. And still others want to be good stewards of their giving and want to know more about how a church spends its money.

The best estimates are that Christians give about two and one-half percent of their income to the church, far below the ten percent advocated by those teaching tithing. And it appears that church giving is on the decline partially due to a decline in regular attendance and also due to the fact the Christians are giving to other charitable organizations. They balk at the idea that the church is Gods storehouse and want to give to other mission agencies and Christian organizations.

It isnt that Christians are stingy. Last year Americans gave an estimated \$97 billion to churches, and that is almost a third of the countrys \$295 billion in charitable donations.[{4}](#)

A number of church leaders and theologians have also entered the debate. They point out that the tithe was an Old Testament requirement, and that New Testament believers no longer live under the Law but under grace.

So in this article we look at the relationship between tithing and charitable giving while looking at the idea of giving in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament Tithe

How are the tithe and charitable giving related? In order to answer that question we need to understand the relationship between the Old Testament tithe and New Testament giving. Lets begin with the teaching about the tithe. The Old Testament

principle of the tithe provides the foundation for New Testament giving.

The word tithe means a tenth part. Once you understand that, you realize that many people use the phrase tithe, but aren't really accurate in using it. Someone who makes \$3000 a month and gives only \$100 a month is not tithing. One study found that only three percent of households tithe their income to their church.[\[5\]](#)

The principle of the tithe can be found in Leviticus 27:30 which says, A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord. We can derive three principles from this passage. First, the tithe was applied to everything from the land and did not just apply to some income or wealth. Second, the tithe belongs to the Lord and not to the people. And, third the tithe is holy, that is, it is set apart and should be given to the Lord.

What if a believer in the Old Testament did not tithe? The answer to that question can be found in Malachi 3:8-10. It says,

Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, How have we robbed You? In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.

If the nation of Israel refused to pay the tithe, then they were considered guilty of robbing God. The Israelites were to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, not just part of the tithe.

In the Old Testament, the tithe was not voluntary but

mandatory. Two kinds of giving are taught in the Bible: giving to the government (compulsory) and giving to God (voluntary). Israel was not only a spiritual community but a nation. The tithe was necessary to fund the nation. That is why many have referred to the tithe as a precursor to taxes. Israel was a theocracy, and the priests were the leaders of the government. They were supported by the tithe.

There were actually three tithes. One tithe was for the priests and Levites: A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord (Leviticus 27:30). This was paid to the Levites, who in turn gave a tenth of that to the priests (Number 18:26). This would be similar to the New Testament giving that goes toward ministry.

The second tithe provided funds for the Jewish festival (Deuteronomy 12:17-18). And a third tithe was to provide support for the widow, orphans, and poor (Deuteronomy 14:26-28). The first two were regularly collected, while the last one was collected every third year. Thus, the total amount of tithe was approximately twenty-three percent each year.

The tithe in the Old Testament was to be given from the first fruits. Proverbs 3:9 says, Honor the Lord from your wealth / And from the first of all your produce. The tithe was to be the first and the best of the crop, not an afterthought.

The first fruits applied to the vineyard (Leviticus 19:23-25) as well as to the production of grain and fruit trees (Exodus 23:16). It also applied to any coarse meal (Numbers 15:20-21) and other produce (2 Chronicles 31:5).

New Testament Giving

Does the New Testament teach the tithe?

Actually, nowhere in the New Testament is there an explicit command to tithe. The primary reason is that the tithe was for the Levites and the priests. The substitutionary death of Christ for our sins did away with the need for a temple. Christians don't need the temple and don't need priests as intercessors. We are all priests now and no longer live under law but under grace (Romans 6:15).

New Testament believers are never commanded to tithe. They are instructed to pay their taxes (Romans 13:1-7). That is the only *required* giving in the church age.

Christians are instructed to give to those who minister (1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 2:10). We are to give to those who trust God to supply their needs (Philippians 4:19). We are to give as God has prospered us (1 Corinthians 16:2), and are to give cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7). And the Bible teaches that we will ultimately give account of our stewardship (Romans 14:12).

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

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

Paul makes it clear that Christians are not to give grudgingly or under compulsion but as each believer has purposed in his heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). So the tithe was no longer the mandatory requirement, but it appeared to provide a basis for

voluntary giving by believers.

Some have noted the similarity between the free will giving in the Old Testament and New Testament giving. One example would be when Moses challenged the people of Israel to give to the tabernacle. They were so enthusiastic, that the people were restrained from bringing any more. For the material they had was sufficient and more than enough (Exodus 36:6-7).

Another example of this would be the free will offerings collected when the temple was rebuilt. We read in the Old Testament book of Ezra that the people were encouraged to give a free will offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:6). So you can see that the concept of voluntary giving did not begin in the New Testament. There are a few examples of it in the Old Testament.

Biblical Principles on Giving (part one)

Given that Christians are commanded to give, the real question we need to answer is how they should give. Not all Christians give the same amount, and sadly many Christians do not give anything to their church or to Christian organizations. So lets look at a few key principles that should guide our giving.

The first principle is that when you sow generously, you will reap generously. 2 Corinthians 9:6 says, Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Elsewhere in Scripture, we read that the size of a harvest corresponds to what we scatter. Proverbs 11:24-25 says,

*There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more,
And there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it
results only in want.*

*The generous man will be prosperous,
And he who waters will himself be watered.*

Of course a spiritual harvest may differ from the kind of seed that is sown. For example, a material seed (giving to ministry) may reap a spiritual harvest (1 Corinthians 9:9).

God has both blessed us materially (Acts 14:17) and spiritually (Roman 5:17). So we can be assured that God will increase our harvest. Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Corinthians 9:10).

A second principle is that we are to give according to what we have purposed in our hearts. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Your giving should be a deliberate act and not just a quick response to some emotional appeal. Certainly there is nothing wrong with giving a freewill offering because God has moved you to support a particular missionary or project. But we should also have a purpose and a plan to our giving.

Many Christians have begun to give through an automatic deduction from their checking account. This has the positive effect to providing regular support for the church or Christian organizations. The monthly amount is deducted whether you are actively thinking about the ministry or not. The possible negative effect is that it could become so automatic, that you might forget about the ministry and fail to pray for it.

A third principle is that we are to give voluntarily. We are told in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that we are not to give under guilt or compulsion. That admonition does not mean that we are only to support the local church or Christian organizations when we feel like it. In this particular passage, Paul was challenging believers in Corinth to give to a special need (the financial needs of the believers in Jerusalem). This was a one-time special offering that was above and beyond providing for the

regular needs of the church in Corinth.

Biblical Principles on Giving (part two)

Another principle taught in Scripture is that we are to give generously. Notice that in 2 Corinthians 9:7 it says that God loves a cheerful giver. God values not the size of the gift (Acts 11:29; 1 Corinthians 16:2) but the heart of the giver (not reluctantly or grudgingly) and the willingness of the giver (a cheerful giver).

We see that principle played out in the Old Testament. When the temple needed to be rebuilt, Joash put an offering box out for those who would give to this important work. 2 Chronicles 24:10 says, All the officials and all the people brought their contributions gladly, dropping them into the chest until it was full. Notice that it says they gave to the rebuilding of the temple gladly. They were glad to give and provided a model for what Paul calls a cheerful giver.

We are also to give sacrificially. As Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, he told them of the sacrificial giving of the Macedonian Christians. He said, . . .in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord (2 Corinthians 8:2-3).

Consider that on the one hand Paul is talking about their deep poverty but then goes on to say that they still gave beyond their ability. I dont know too many people who today are giving beyond their ability. I know quite a few people who are giving less than their ability. Over my years in ministry, I have had many people tell me that they cannot afford to tithe. In this passage, Paul challenges the believers in Corinth (and by extension challenges us) to reevaluate our priorities and give sacrificially.

Once again we can see this principle at work in the Old Testament as well. David balked at giving a sacrifice to the Lord that was not really a sacrifice for him to give. In 2 Samuel 24:24 David says, I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing. David is reminding us by his behavior that true sacrificial giving means being willing to sacrifice that which we would be inclined to keep for ourselves.

I trust this biblical perspective on giving has been helpful to you. It has been challenging for me to research and write, and I hope it challenges you to reconsider what you are giving to the church and Christian ministries. May we all be found faithful in our giving to the Lord.

Notes

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What's Happening to Our

Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, [*The Last Christian Generation*](#), where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, (www.youthtransitionnetwork.org) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak "Christianese" to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1)

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They don't feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a

disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They're not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don't feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. That's a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can't name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don't know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don't believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, don't believe in Satan and don't believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long [Mind Games Conference](#) will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more fruitful:

- www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.
- www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.
- collegel01seminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.
- [Conversations CD](#) this information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.
- www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.
- TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

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The Tablet of Nabu: Another Confirmation of the Bible

This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find.

Dr. Irving Finkel, British Museum

The Discovery

A significant discovery related to Biblical history was made in the British Museum's great Arched Room which holds nearly 130,000 Assyrian cuneiform tablets.^[1] Among the tablets, some of which date back nearly 5000 years, one tablet in particular, measuring only 2.13 inches wide or about the size of a small cigarette pack, was recently translated by Assyriologist and Professor from the University of Vienna, Dr. Michael Jursa. This cuneiform tablet was dated to 595 BC, or the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

When deciphered it named a high ranking official of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar named *Nebo-Sarsekim*. *Nebo-Sarsekim* is also named in the Book of Jeremiah 39:1-3. The passage reads:

*This is how Jerusalem was taken: In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. ² And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, the city wall was broken through. ³ Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, **Nebo-Sarsekim** a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon.*

Jeremiah identifies *Nebo-Sarsekim* as a chief officer of Nebuchadnezzar who was with the King at the siege of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Jeremiah records that several of Nebuchadnezzar's top officials took seats in the Middle Gate once they broke through the walls of Jerusalem.

The Assyrian tablet identifies *Nebo-Sarsekim* as the chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar, thus confirming Jeremiah's reference. The full translation of the tablet reads:

(Regarding) 1.5 minas (0.75 kg or 1.65 pounds) of gold, the

property of Nabu-sharrussu-ukin, the chief eunuch, which he sent via Arad-Banitu the eunuch to [the temple] Esangila: Arad-Banitu has delivered [it] to Esangila. In the presence of Bel-usat, son of Alpaya, the royal bodyguard, [and of] Nadin, son of Marduk-zer-ibni. Month XI, day 18, year 10 [of] Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.[{2}](#)

The tablet is the financial record of Nebo-Sarsekims gift of gold given to the Temple of Esangila, which was located in the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon.[{3}](#) This financial transaction took place in the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar while Nabu-Sarsekim was serving as the chief officer to Nebuchadnezzar. This was nine years before the siege of Jerusalem. Dr. Jursa states, "It's very exciting and very surprising. Finding something like this tablet, where we see a person mentioned in the Bible making an everyday payment to the temple in Babylon and quoting the exact date, is quite extraordinary."[{4}](#)

The Significance of the Discovery

The significance of this discovery is that the Tablet of Nabu is a text outside of the Bible that confirms Jeremiahs record of Nebo-Sarsekim as a historical figure. Nebo-Sarsekim is not a prominent figure, but the fact that Jeremiah was accurate on details such as these adds considerable credibility to the Book of Jeremiah. If a writer is accurate on minor details like this, we can be confident that other recorded events which may not have archaeological confirmation are also true. Dr Irving Finkel, assistant keeper in the Department of the Middle East stated, "This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find. If Nebo-Sarsekim existed, which other lesser figures in the Old Testament existed? A throwaway detail in the Old Testament turns out to be accurate and true. I think that it means that the whole of the narrative [of Jeremiah] takes on a new kind of power."[{5}](#)

This discovery of the Tablet of Nabu is yet another among thousands of archaeological findings that confirm characters, places, and events mentioned in the Bible. Not only are major historical figures confirmed, but so have many minor characters such as Nebo-Sarsekim and others also been confirmed. Dr. Geza Vermes, the eminent emeritus professor of Jewish studies at the University of Oxford, said that such a discovery revealed that “the Biblical story is not altogether invented.” He added, “This will be interesting for religious people as much as historians.”^{6} When a work has so much historical and archaeological confirmation, particularly when it comes to minor details, we can be confident that it is indeed a very accurate historical document. Discoveries such as this tablet continue to confirm the Bible’s historical accuracy. Therefore, we can have greater confidence in the historical nature of the events where we may not have extra-biblical corroboration.

Notes

1. Nigel Reynolds, “Tiny Tablet Provides Proof for Old Testament,” *Telegraph.co.uk.*, 13 July 2007, tinyurl.com/2bbcac.
2. Ibid.
3. Dalya Alberge, “Museum’s tablet lends new weight to Biblical truth,” *The London Times* 11 July 2007, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2056362.ece
4. Ibid.
5. Nigel Reynolds, “Tiny Tablet.”
6. Dalya Alberge, “Museum’s tablet.”

The Gospel of Thomas – A Christian Evaluation

Don Closson looks at the Gospel of Thomas, considering its relationship to the four gospels included in the New Testament. His Christian evaluation of this text demonstrates that it is a later work written in the fourth century after Christ and inconsistent with the original first century writings. Some of the ideas presented in this document were rejected by the early church of the first century.

What Is It, and Why Is It Important?

Anyone who has visited the Wikipedia web site, the online encyclopedia with almost two million entries, knows that while the information is usually presented in a scholarly style, it can be a bit slanted at times. So when I recently read its entry for the “Gospel of Thomas,” I was not surprised to find it leaning towards the view that this letter is probably an early document, earlier than the other four Gospels of the New Testament, and an authentic product of the apostle known as Didymus or Thomas. The two Wikipedia sources most mentioned in support of this position are Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, and the group of scholars known as the [Jesus Seminar](#). Both are known for their distaste for evangelical theology and traditional views on the [canon](#) in general.



What I found more interesting, though, is the background discussion on the article. Wikipedia includes a running dialogue of the debates that determine what actually gets posted into the article, as well as what gets removed,

and here the discussion can be a bit more emotional. One contributor argues that no Christian should be allowed to contribute because of their bias and commitment to the canon of the New Testament. He adds that only atheists and Jews should be allowed to participate (no bias here). The discussion also reflects the idea that as early as the beginning of the second century, the Catholic Church was conducting a massive conspiracy to keep certain texts and ideas out of the public's hands and minds.

For those who have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, let me provide some background. A copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found among thirteen leather-bound books in Egypt in 1945 near a town called Nag Hammadi. The books themselves are dated to be about A.D. 350 to 380 and are written in the Coptic language. The Gospel of Thomas contains one hundred fourteen sayings that are mostly attributed to Jesus. Parts of Thomas had been uncovered in the 1890s in the form of three Greek papyrus fragments. The book opens with a prologue that reads, "These are the secret words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas, even Thomas, wrote," which is followed by the words "the Gospel according to Thomas."[\[1\]](#)

Why should Christians take the time to think about this book called by some "the fifth gospel"? Mainly, because the Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest texts found at Nag Hammadi, and because it is being offered by some scholars as an authentic form of early Christianity that competed with the traditional Gospels but was unfairly suppressed.

Dating and Canonicity

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that there was an early competition between the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, and that it was mishandled by the early Church Fathers. As a result, Christianity may have adopted an incorrect view of who Jesus was and what his message actually

taught.

A key component in this debate is the question of when the Gospel of Thomas was written. Pagels defends a date earlier than the Gospel of John, which would put it before A.D. 90. She and others support this idea by arguing that Thomas is different in both form and content than the other gospels and that it has material in common with an early source referred to as Q. Many New Testament scholars argue that there existed an early written text they call Q and that Matthew and Luke both drew from it. Since Q predated Matthew and Luke, it follows that it is earlier than John's Gospel as well.

However, most scholars believe that Thomas is a second century work and that it was written in Syria.^{2} Thomas may contain sayings going back to Jesus that are independent of the Gospels, but most of the material is rearranged and restated ideas from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

An argument against an early Thomas is called the *criterion of multiple attestations*.^{3} It goes something like this. The many early testimonies that we have regarding the teachings of Jesus contain material on the end times and a final judgment. These early testimonies include Mark, what is common to Matthew and Luke (i.e., what is in Q), what is unique to Matthew, and what is unique to Luke. All include end times teaching by Jesus. Thomas does not. Instead, Thomas seems to teach that the kingdom has already arrived in full and that no future event need occur. The Gospel of Thomas shows the development of later ideas that rejected Jewish beliefs and show the inclusion of pagan Greek thought.

Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180.^{4} He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian's Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New

Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles.

Gospel Competition

Was there a marketplace of widespread and equally viable religious ideas in the early church, or was there a clear tradition handed down by the apostles and defended by the Church Fathers that accurately and exclusively communicated the teachings of Jesus Christ?

A group of Scholars sometimes known as the "New School" believe that the Gospel of Thomas is an alternative source for understanding who the real Jesus is and what he taught. As noted earlier, Elaine Pagels and the Jesus Seminar are two of the better known sources that defend the authenticity and early date of the Thomas letter. They believe that orthodoxy was up for grabs within the early Christian community, and that John's Gospel, written around A.D. 90, was unfairly used by Irenaeus in the late second century to exclude and suppress the Thomas material.

Pagels writes that Irenaeus, in his attempt to "stabilize" Christianity, imposed a "canon, creed, and hierarchy" on the church in response to "devastating persecution" from the pagan and Jewish population, and in the process he suppressed other legitimate forms of spirituality.^{5} Pagels admits that by A.D. 200 "Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the one 'true faith'."^{6} But it is not entirely clear to Pagels that the right people and ideas won the day; we could be missing an important aspect of what Jesus taught.

Because of this she believes that we need to rethink what

orthodoxy and heterodoxy mean. Just because Irenaeus labeled a set of ideas as heretical or placed a group of writings outside of the inspired canon of the New Testament doesn't necessarily mean that he was right. Pagels adds that Christianity would be a richer faith if it allowed the traditions and ideas that Irenaeus fought against back into church.

Evangelicals have no problem with the idea that there were competing beliefs in the early church environment. The biblical account mentions several: Simon the magician in Acts, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 1 Timothy, and the docetists, who believed that Jesus only "appeared to be in the flesh," are referred to in John's epistles. However, they do not agree with Pagels' conclusions.

The various religious ideas competing with the traditional view were rejected by the earliest and most attested to sources handed down to us from the early church. They were systematically rejected even before Irenaeus or the emergence of the canon in the third and fourth centuries.

Contents

Attempts to classify the contents of the Gospel of Thomas have been almost as controversial as dating it. Those who support it being an early and authentic witness to the life and ministry of Jesus argue that it offers a form of Christianity more compelling than the traditional view. For instance, in her book *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels explains how she discovered an unexpected spiritual power in the Gospel of Thomas. She writes, 'It doesn't tell you what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.'^[7] This statement comes after a time in her life when she had consciously rejected the teachings of evangelical

Christianity. It also coincides with the height of the self-actualization movement of psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow which would have made the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas seem very modern. Pagels argues that just because Thomas sounds different to us, it is not necessarily wrong, heretical, or Gnostic.

So what does Thomas teach? On a spectrum between the traditional gospel on one end and full blown Gnosticism of the late second century on the other, Thomas is closer to the four traditional Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. It includes comments about the kingdom of God, prophetic sayings, and beatitudes, and doesn't contain Gnostic elements regarding the creation of the world and multiple layers of deity. However, its one hundred fourteen sayings portray Jesus as more Buddhist than Jewish.

According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, "the bulk of the gospel seems to reflect recastings of the synoptic material, that is, a reworking of material from Matthew, Mark, and Luke." In doing so, Jesus comes across more as a wise sage turning his followers inward for salvation rather than towards himself as a unique atonement for sin. For instance, Saying Three includes the words, 'When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.'" Bock concludes that 'In Thomas, the key to God's kingdom is self-knowledge and self-understanding. Spiritual awakening produces life."[\[8\]](#)

Even if the Gospel of Thomas is a first century document, it is offering a different gospel. Early church leaders compared the teachings of Thomas with the oral tradition handed down from the apostles and with the traditional gospels and rejected Thomas.

Summary

Although the focus here has been the Gospel of Thomas, our discussion is part of a larger debate. This larger question asks which ideas and texts present in the first and second century should be considered Christian and included in what we call the canon of Scripture. In other words, are there ideas and texts that were unfairly suppressed by individuals or the organized church in the early days of Christianity?

In his book *The Missing Gospels*, Darrell Bock lists three major problems with the view held by those who think that we should include the Gospel of Thomas and other so called “missing gospels” into the sphere of orthodox Christianity.

First, this group undervalues the evidence that the traditional sources are still “our best connection to the Christian faith’s earliest years.”^{9} Elaine Pagels and others work hard to show that all religious ideas during this time period are human products and have equal merit. They also claim that we know little about who wrote the four Gospels of the NT, often implying that they too could be forgeries.

While there is a healthy debate surrounding the evidence supporting the traditional works, Bock asserts that, “the case that the Gospels are rooted in apostolic connections either directly by authorship or by apostolic association is far greater for the four Gospels than for any of the other alternative gospels,” including Thomas.^{10} He adds that “the Gospels we have in the fourfold collection have a line of connection to the earliest days and figures of the Christian faith that the alternatives texts do not possess. For example, the Church Father Clement, writing in A.D. 95 states, ‘The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the

Word of God, they went forth.”[\[11\]](#)

Secondly, supporters of these alternative texts fail to admit that the ideas taught by the “missing gospels” about the nature of God, the work and person of Christ, and the nature of salvation were immediately rejected from the mid-first century on.[\[12\]](#)

Finally, those who support Thomas are wrong when they claim that “there simply was variety in the first two centuries, with neither side possessing an implicit right to claim authority.”[\[13\]](#) Instead, there was a core belief system built upon the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus Christ.

As Bock argues, Irenaeus and others who rejected the ideas found in the Gospel of Thomas were not the creators of orthodoxy, they were created by it.

Notes

1. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 61.
3. Ibid., 62.
4. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 67.
5. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, (New York: Random House, 2003), inside front cover.
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xxiii.
7. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 32.
8. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 166.
9. Ibid., 202.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 204.
12. Ibid., 207.
13. Ibid., 211.

See Also:

[The Jesus Seminar](#) by Jimmy Williams

[A Brief Overview of The Gospel of Judas](#) by Patrick Zukeran

[Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip](#) by Michael Gleghorn

[Probe Articles Answering The Da Vinci Code](#)

Is This the Last Christian Generation? – The Future of American Christianity

Steve Cable joins Josh McDowell in asking about the future of the American church. Do Christians have the will to turn around the degradation of biblical beliefs and restore the church to a state of vibrant belief in Christ touching the lives of everyone in the country? According to Josh's research, we need to change the trends to have a chance of growing the church.

The Concern

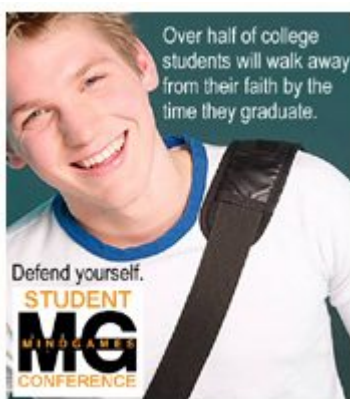
Is this the last Christian generation in America? Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties stated recently in *Christianity Today*, "There are a lot of people who've had this nagging sense that we're missing the mark somehow . . . kids seem happy and willing to attend, and engage in our ministries, but five years from now, when they're in college

or post-college, they just really aren't connecting with real faith, let alone church."

I know what you are thinking: "This is not new." Of course, I agree. For over thirty years, Probe Ministries has worked to create a strong foundation for Christian teens.

However, some believe it has reached a dangerous new level. This upswing has prompted Josh McDowell to co-write a new book with Dave Bellis. Josh states, "the decision to call this [book] *The Last Christian Generation* was not made lightly nor was it done for sensationalism. I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our young people – you will become the last Christian generation!" [\[1\]](#)

Is Josh's concern justified? Will this trend correct itself or will we follow in the secular footsteps of Western Europe?



How are we doing at converting church involvement by teens into a lifelong relationship with Christ? A 2006 study indicates that over eighty percent of today's teens attend church for a period of at least two months during their teenage years. What an opportunity! The bad news is that only one out of four of those church youth are still spiritually engaged by age twenty-nine; [\[2\]](#) that is, they are still actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying. In comparison, roughly twice as many adults in their forties are spiritually engaged.

An earlier study looked at the beliefs of teens involved in evangelical churches. Over two-thirds of these young people believe

- that there is no absolute moral truth,
- that Christianity is about showing bad people how to live better,
- that there is no way to tell which religion is true,
- that Jesus is not the Son of the one true God.

And, over half believe

- that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Is it any wonder that these young people readily abandon their Christian involvement when confronted with a hostile culture?

The Causes

Let's consider some potential causes three out of four churched teens become disengaged from Christianity during their twenties.

One cause may be the way we define and measure youth ministry. As adults abdicate their training responsibility, our youth are isolated as their own congregation. The measure of success is numerical attendance rather than instilling a life long discipline for spiritual growth. Church becomes a series of fun activities interspersed with encouragement to avoid risky behaviors.

A second factor is primarily teaching topical lessons on Christian rules rather than laying a strong foundation of truth. As our teens move into college, professors, peers, and the popular media all portray authentic Christianity in a negative light. It takes a strong foundation to

choose to endure hostility when one can adopt a so-called “private faith” and avoid the confrontation. As you know, soldiers participate in exercises simulating the most effective tactics of their opponents before being sent onto the battlefield. Yet, in training our teens, we often avoid exposing them to the tough questions lest some of them are put off by the experience.

A third factor is allowing teens to be content with a second-hand faith. In Joshua, we learn that “Israel served the LORD . . . all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD” (24:31). After these elders who had personally experienced the Lord died, most in Israel fell away from serving God. More recently, during the Welsh revival of 1904, over 100,000 conversions were recorded in less than five months. The impact was so pervasive that police duties were reduced to providing quartets for prayer meetings. A century later, church attendance in Wales is at an all-time low. Only nineteen percent of UK teenagers say they had a religious faith (as compared to over seventy percent for US teens). Luis Palau summed up the Welsh experience by noting, “God has no grandchildren.” Teens who attend church to live out their parents’ faith find it easy to leave the faith to conform to the expectations of their new authority figures.

These three factors have been around since the inception of Probe. A new factor, somewhat unique to today’s culture is a “distorted worldview filter” unwittingly adopted by our youth and adults. This filter tells them:

- Truth is relative, not absolute.
- Science and spirituality are at odds.
- Science confirms that I am nothing but insignificant dirt.
- An irrational, spiritual tradition can help me cope with this harsh reality.

- However, I am in no position to critically evaluate someone else's tradition.

With this distorted filter in place, even solid biblical teaching can leave teens unprepared to stand firm in their faith.

The Last Christian Generation lists some of the concepts distorted by this filter, for example:[{3}](#)

- Truth now means whatever is right for you.
- Tolerance means accepting that each individual's values and lifestyles are equally valid.
- Moral judgments mean bigoted attitudes we have no right to hold.

Many teens are synthesizing Christian teaching and popular culture into a new personal religion. In their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,[{4}](#) the authors found that religious teens tend to hold a vague group of functionally religious beliefs the authors termed "moralistic therapeutic deism."[{5}](#) Its key tenets are:

- God is distant and uninvolved in daily life.
- But I can call on God as a "cosmic therapist" when I have a problem.
- My purpose is to be happy and feel good about myself.
- If I avoid being an intolerant jerk, I will go to heaven.

Although these beliefs could be considered theistic, they definitely are not evangelical Christianity.

What happens when these beliefs are put to the test? I've known Julie[{6}](#) all her life. Julie consistently attended youth group. She was also tuned into the popular culture. When her

circumstances disappointed her, she turned to God as her “cosmic therapist.” When He did not change her circumstances to suit her, she decided that God was not worth her time. Instead, she chose to escape her circumstances through drugs. She had distorted the truth into a perversion that prevented her from having a solid relationship with her Creator.

The Correction

How should we respond to this disturbing trend?

Historically, much of youth ministry has been about getting the crowd in the door and keeping them involved. Recent studies show we are doing a good job at this function.^{7} But we are not doing well if we measure success by how many are still actively involved through their twenties. If the problem is not getting them in the door, it must be in what is happening once they are involved.

Josh McDowell suggests that we need to readjust both what is being taught and how it is being taught.^{8} We need to train our youth in a “relational apologetic,” meaning knowing and defending a belief in God as absolute reality revealed through the Bible *and* experiencing this truth lived out in their lives and through the example of others.

What should we teach? Although we should not ignore behavioral issues such as sex, drugs, etc., McDowell calls us to help our teens see the reality of God. If there is a God, it is of paramount importance that we seek to know absolute Truth with a capital T. Consistent with everything the tools of modern science can observe about our universe, they have rational reasons to believe that God has revealed Himself to us through His Word.

McDowell and Bellis suggest teens must learn to know Him as the God of redemption, relationships, and restoration.^{9} A clear understanding of each of these aspects serves an

important role in countering the tenets of today's teen religion which we defined above as "moralistic therapeutic deism":

- Knowing the God of redemption tells them that good people don't go to heaven; redeemed people go to heaven. Our definition of good is so shallow compared to a transcendent, holy God. We must rely on Him for redemption.
- Knowing the God of relationships tells them God is not a cosmic therapist, but a personal heavenly Father, intimately involved in all aspects of life.
- Knowing the God of restoration highlights that our earthly life is a brief precursor to eternity. This truth changes our central goal to creating eternal value in Christ.

Youth who can articulate these truths have taken a big step to repairing their distorted worldview filter.

Laying a Firm Foundation

McDowell points out that it is not only what we teach but how we teach it that is important.[{10}](#) In America, we have adopted a Hellenistic [Greek] teaching model focused on communicating information and testing whether the student can regurgitate it. In addition, Christianity is often communicated as a set of behavior rules covering one topic at a time, rather than as a deep relationship emulating the character of our heavenly Father. Bits of knowledge and rules for behavior are not a comprehensive worldview.

In contrast to the Hellenistic model, the Hebrew model of Deuteronomy and Proverbs uses a set of ongoing object lessons, applying the character of God to each life situation. The entire inter-generational community is modeling their faith and articulating their biblical worldview. For this model to

work, parents and youth leaders must continually express their reasons for believing that Jesus is the truth in a world that says there is no truth. Teens must experience a community of faith willing to trade in a life purpose of being happy and avoiding pain for a life purpose of building eternal value through serving Jesus.

This may sound like a daunting task, but there are ministries that want to come alongside and help in this process. Josh McDowell's ministry is developing study materials and training events specifically designed to fill this need. More information is available at truefoundations.com. Probe Ministries offers the Student *Mind Games* Conference, a week-long camp designed to equip students to stand firm in their faith through college and beyond.^{11} In addition, Probe offers speakers, curricula and other materials to help parents, youth leaders and students to articulate and live a relational apologetic. You can visit our website at Probe.org.

We know the church will survive and ultimately triumph at the return of Jesus, but there is no promise that America will continue to have a high percentage of evangelical Christians. Four out of five youth in America are giving us a chance to influence the future. I believe God has called all of us to be a part of responding to that challenge.

Notes

1. Josh McDowell & David Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, Fla.: Green Key Books, 2006).
2. "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," *The Barna Update*, Sept. 11, 2006, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=245
3. Ibid., 1.

4. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2005).
5. Bruce Murray, "Understanding the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers," FACSNET, www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/youth.php.
6. Not her real name.
7. Ibid., 2.
8. Ibid., 1.
9. Ibid., 1.
10. Ibid., 1.
11. More information is available on the Probe Web site at probe.org/mindgames.

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