

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

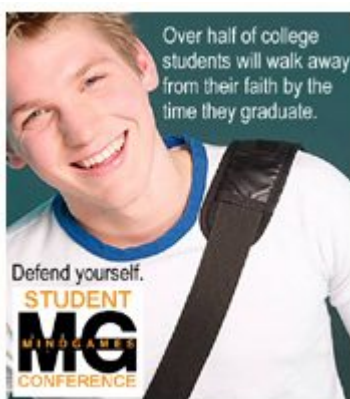
Is this the last Christian generation in America? Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties stated recently in *Christianity Today*, "There are a lot of people who've had this nagging sense that we're missing the mark somehow . . . kids seem happy and willing to attend, and engage in our ministries, but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

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

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

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

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

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

Harnden says forgiveness “releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”[{2}](#)

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

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

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If

offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

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

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

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

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

reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

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

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

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

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

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

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

Chilling memories flooded back.

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

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

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

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

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

“My Father, the Town Alcoholic”

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms “grudge” and “grudge

management” in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt “forgiveness” was a feminine activity, but a “grudge” was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

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

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

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

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

“But how . . . how can you love a father like me?” Josh's dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and

he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God's hands. "My dad's life was brand new those last 14 months," recalls Josh. "His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker."

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

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

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

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

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

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

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of

forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

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

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

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

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
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9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.
10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.
11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this source.
12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.
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Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer

Experimenting With Prayer

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

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

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

prayers for healing to no avail? Might they even be counterproductive?

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

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

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

Providence or Coincidence?

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

Now there have been many times when this would have really made me angry. But on this occasion, I simply bowed my head in prayer and asked God for his help. I then sat down on the hood

of my car to wait. I was a bit concerned because I knew it would soon be dark. But since there wasn't anything that I could do about *that*, I simply determined to trust the Lord.

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

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

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

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

just have to learn to live with a bit of mystery about our prayers.

Whatever We Ask?

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

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

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

In addition, it’s not very hard to think of examples in which it might be *unwise* for God to give us whatever we ask. After all, finite and fallible human beings are often inclined to ask God for rather foolish things. It wouldn’t always be best for God to give us whatever we requested. For example, suppose

a godly young man who desperately wants to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary is praying that God will grant him a particular young lady to be his wife. But suppose that this young lady has a passion to serve the Lord here in some way. Finally, suppose that they would both be miserable and spiritually unproductive if they married each other, but they would both be deeply satisfied and productive in the work of the Lord if they each married someone else. Would it really be wise for God to grant this young man's request? It sure doesn't seem like it. Sometimes, as Garth Brooks observed, we can all thank God for unanswered prayers!

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 1

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

Let me suggest two responses to this. First, I think that when his words are properly interpreted, Jesus himself qualifies his promises right from the start. Second, the other qualifications I will mention are all firmly rooted in the Scriptures. In other words, we won't be tampering with the Bible. We'll rather be looking at its teachings to see if there are any qualifications expressed elsewhere in its pages that might qualify Jesus' promises in some way.

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

What does it mean to ask for something *in Jesus' name*? Many people treat this phrase as something akin to a magical

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

But there's more. As we search the Scriptures we find yet other principles that appear to qualify Jesus' promise. Dr. Craig mentions several of these in his book *Hard Questions, Real Answers*.[{9}](#) For instance, our requests might be denied because of unconfessed sin in our lives. The psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). Further, our requests might also be denied if they arise from impure motives. James states quite pointedly, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (4:3).

Qualifying Christ's Promises, Pt. 2

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

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

Second, as William Lane Craig observes, "Sometimes our prayers

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

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

These are a few more reasons why our prayers to God might not be granted. But what if none of these reasons applies in our case? What if we've confessed all known sin, our motives are pure, and we've prayed earnestly, with perseverance, and in faith, and still our heartfelt requests to God are denied? What should we conclude then? That God doesn't really care? Or that he doesn't even exist?

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

Notes

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3. Ibid.
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5. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 43.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 44.
8. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:146.
9. The remainder of this discussion is much indebted to William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 47-55.
10. Ibid., 49.

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

What Do Modern Historians Think?

“I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can’t believe He performed miracles.” Ever hear comments like this? Maybe you’ve wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar^{1}, has stated, “Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist.”^{2} Commenting on Jesus’ ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, “For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent.”^{3}

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus’ life and deeds developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus’ life, as it’s recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.^{4} Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and “exorcise demons.”^{5} But because many of these liberal scholars don’t believe in spiritual beings, they also don’t believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention

of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.[\[6\]](#) The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments believed that the "real" Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus' life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great's biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn't begin to develop until the following five hundred years.[\[7\]](#) A gross misrepresentation of Jesus' life occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus' life, and in light of his

very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples' teaching about Jesus' life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.[{8}](#)

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.[{9}](#) Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into

miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.[{10}](#) It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up were it not actually the case.[{11}](#)

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.[{12}](#) They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.[{13}](#) Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.[{14}](#) Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many

miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

“Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?” Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don’t believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don’t believe it’s possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus’ healings were primarily psychological in nature.[{15}](#) Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus’ resurrection.[{16}](#) Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there’s the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.[{17}](#) A careful reading of this text reveals many details that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John’s gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It’s possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany,

and then He tells us the town's approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.[{18}](#) Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.[{19}](#) If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such

Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.[{20}](#) If it were known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.[{21}](#) Apparently, the rabbi believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.[{22}](#) If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

Notes

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Grief and Grace

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

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

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

last time.

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

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

Grief and Loss

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the removal of

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

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

God—simultaneously.

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

Comfort and Grace

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

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

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

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

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

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts

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

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

In what ways can God's people administer God's comforting grace? Certainly through following Jesus' example to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15b; contra Proverbs 25:20). By learning to be comfortable and patient with those who are actively grieving their losses. By learning to be "quick to

hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19b). By being a "ready listener." I've personally found that those who have simply "listened to my story" have greatly comforted me. I once heard a pastor speak of this effect as "healing through the laying on of ears." What a great phrase! When Job's friends first came "to sympathize with him and comfort him" (2:11b), it is said that "they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (2:13). (Oh that they would have remained in silent mode!) Later, Job made this telling statement: "For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty" (6:14). The thought is that lack of kindness can serve only to push people further from God when they are despairing. I've talked with many people in the hospital through the years who have distanced themselves from various churches. When I've inquired about what occasioned their departure, too often I have been told that it was during a time of bereavement. You can fill in the rest of the story. One way I've learned that we "speak the truth in love" is by being sensitive to the recipient's present ability to receive it and absorb it. ("I have many more things to say to you, *but you cannot bear them now*", John 16:12.)

Closing Thoughts

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rate of recovery is unique for every person. But there is

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

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

Suggested reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Emerging Church

Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia, and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue. The leaders of this movement have written and spoken at length regarding the necessity for change and have enumerated the types of changes that the church needs to make to survive and thrive in the years to come.

The difficulty for outsiders trying to weigh their arguments begins with trying to define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. Some see it as a loss of modernity's confidence in science and technology; others see it as something much deeper. One emerging church Web site uses a definition written

by an English professor at a major university who writes that “Postmodernism . . . doesn’t lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let’s not pretend that art can make meaning then, let’s just play with nonsense.”[\[1\]](#)

Postmodernity is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one’s experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

Brian McLaren is a leader among those who argue that radical change must come to the church or else our culture will deem it irrelevant. He writes, “Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, [and] untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision.”[\[2\]](#)

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

What’s Good About the Emerging Church?

If the emerging church is anything, it’s sensitive to the culture around it. Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society. These changes include the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. At the same time, Western civilization has experienced a dramatic decrease in biblical literacy.

The leadership of the emerging church argues against those who are tempted to respond to these changes by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that

idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D. A. Carson writes that "this is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians, and perhaps to God himself." {3}

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life. It has also led to a lack of humility regarding the limitations of language to communicate the mysteries of God's person and rule. The drive for theological precision has left the church divided and worn out, unable to offer the world a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

The emerging church is responding to what it perceives to be a lack of authenticity in our worship and Christian life in general. They would agree with Carson who writes, "Sermons are filled with clichés. There is little intensity in confession, little joy in absolution, little delight in the gospel, little passion for the truth, little compassion for others, little humility in our evaluations, [and] little love in our dealings with others." {4}

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church including all the "one another"

admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As Stanley Grenz writes, “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”[\[5\]](#)

Concerns About the Emerging Church

Among the many concerns that have been written about the emerging church, we will focus primarily on just two issues. The first is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era, usually seen as the time period between the Enlightenment and the late 1900s, and the other is its teaching regarding what we can confidently know as believers.

Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. D. A. Carson writes that the movement’s “distortion of modernism extends, in the case of some emerging church thinkers, to a distortion of confessional Christianity under modernism.”[\[6\]](#) Emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Drained of any passion, the church in the modern era became a shadow of what it should be. Although there are times where this in fact happened, the modern era is far too complex to reduce it, or the manifestation of the church in it, to such a simple portrayal.

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by

Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. These ideas also impacted the church during this so called "modern" era. While many sought a more scientific faith and utilized the new tools of science to justify Christianity, others followed the lead of Søren Kierkegaard towards a more existential Christian life.

In its attack against modernism, the emerging church has condemned confessional Christianity as too abstract and rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often, it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case? C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet understood the power of story and the imagination.

The Problem of Knowing

This leads us into the second area of concern regarding the emerging church. How much knowledge about God, the human condition and salvation can we confidently possess? This question is directly tied to our concept of revelation. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

The most important criticism of the emerging church is its application of postmodern epistemology. Epistemology is the part of philosophy that asks, "How do you know that," or "How do we know anything at all?". Some in the emerging church movement have endorsed an extreme version of postmodern epistemology that creates an either/or view of knowledge that can be very manipulative.

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true

unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself. Since few of us would claim to have God's perspective or knowledge on an issue, they argue that we must admit that everything we claim to know is only a very limited personal perspective on the truth. In addition, what little we think we know is highly impacted, some say completely constructed, by the social group we participate in as individuals.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase "it might be true for you, but not for me" becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

There are other ways of thinking about what we know that sets the standard for knowing lower and yet maintains the sense of postmodern humility that is attractive to many.

One suggestion is called the "fusion of horizons" model of knowledge. Just like everyone's view of the horizon is slightly different, everyone's understanding of an event or idea is slightly different because it's filtered through a person's experiences and perspective. For example, let's consider the case of a twenty-first century biblically illiterate person trying to understand Paul's message in Romans.[{7}](#) At first, there will be little overlap in how she and Paul understand the world. But what if she read the rest of the Bible, learned Greek, attended Bible studies, and read books about the first century Roman culture? Her understanding will never be exactly the same as Paul's, but slowly she will get closer and closer to his world and develop a clearer

picture of what Paul was attempting to communicate. She may choose to disagree with Paul, but she will understand him.

If this were not true, it would make little sense when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand." The strong postmodern view of knowledge leaves us little hope that the knowledge of the gospel can be heard and understood.

Summary

Leaders of the emerging church argue that Christianity must focus more on authenticity and relationships and less on propositional truth or it will become irrelevant and ineffective. But is the focus on relationships and authenticity necessarily antithetical to propositional truth? Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church's emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

The Jesus People U.S.A. attracted a wide following in the 70's because of their emphasis on relationships, commitment to communal living, and the rejection of what they perceived to be an overly materialistic culture. Although the movement included some fringe ideas, it has become part of the evangelical mainstream over the years and given churches another example of how to impact the culture with biblical truth.

Another significant movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible church movement of the '80s and '90s. Gene Getz's 1975 book *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. His thesis is that while the second chapter of Acts clearly communicates the critical functions of the church, the New

Testament allows considerable freedom regarding how those functions are carried out. Getz's attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the threefold lens of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship. At the time, his use of various audio/visual tools for teaching from the pulpit and meeting in non-traditional facilities seemed quite radical. But his ultimate goal was for believers to break away from the calcified forms of doing church and to experience the fellowship and community that can be generated when we take all of the "one-another's" of Scripture seriously.

Another important contributor to this discussion was Francis Schaeffer. His book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* asked us to discern the difference between the functions of the church that are listed in Scripture and the forms that are used in different cultural settings. He wrote, "In a rapidly changing age like ours, an age of total upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolute guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutional, organized church."^[8] Schaeffer had a huge impact on the baby boomer generation without sacrificing the truth claims of Scripture.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

Notes

1. Mary Klages, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado, www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
2. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), xi.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), 49.

4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid., 60.
7. Ibid., 116.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 1970), 67.

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Making Moral Choices – From A Biblical Worldview Perspective

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

Love and Biblical Morality

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

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

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

Biblical morality is also based upon love that has its source in God. Jesus was asked by the teachers of the law which was the most important commandment. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

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

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

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

He also teaches that God shows His love to us in that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8) and that nothing will separate us

from the love of Christ (Rom. 6:37-39). And this is not just a theological truth, but the “love of Christ controls us” (2 Corinthians 5:14) and provides us with an ability to live the Christian life.

Knowing God’s Will

How do we make proper moral choices based upon biblical principles? The Bible does provide biblical guidelines on a vast array of issues. Christians also have the liberty to make individual moral choices in areas of moral neutrality. Ultimately, making moral choices involves discerning the will of God in one’s life.

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

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

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

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

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

your requests to God.”

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

A third way we discern God’s will is through our conscience. If our conscience is troubling us about a particular action or behavior, then we should refrain from that activity. Paul says that each person “must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). He adds that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

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

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

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

Christian Liberty

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

Even though a particular action may not be prohibited in

Scripture, it still may be offensive to others because of their social, ethnic, or religious background. Another person's family background or spiritual maturity is also a consideration Christians must make.

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

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

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

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

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

sinful to indulge in a practice, then it is indeed sinful for them.

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

A key test of Christian obedience is whether a person can do so “for the Lord” (Romans 14:6). Christians are to “live for the Lord” because “we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). If one cannot participate in an activity while serving the Lord, then he or she should refrain. Paul says that “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

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

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

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

A final principle is how a particular action or behavior will

affect the individual believer's walk with the Lord. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 that; "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything."

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

Honesty and Biblical Morality

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

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

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

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

Honesty also requires telling the truth. The Ten Commandments forbids both the swearing of false oaths and the bearing of false testimony (Exodus 20:7, 16; Deuteronomy 5:11, 20; cf. Leviticus 19:12; Jeremiah 7:9). In the Old Testament, false witnesses were to suffer the same punishment that they had hoped to inflict upon the others (Deuteronomy 19:16-21).

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

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

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

We need truth telling today like never before. Perhaps the greatest battle in society today is a battle over truth. Voters are skeptical of politicians. Proponents of various biomedical procedures (abortion, cloning) often redefine terms

and mislead the public about the true nature of the procedures they advocate. We need Christians to set an example by being honest and telling the truth.

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What Happens After Death? A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran brings a biblical perspective to a question we all would like to know: what happens to me after I die? He looks to the Bible to determine what we can and cannot know about our life after we pass out of our present bodies.



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

Differing Perspectives on Death

For the entire existence of mankind, we have struggled with the question, “What happens after death?” Our answer to this dilemma has great implications for our life here on earth. Although many avoid the issue, we must sooner or later address the question. There are many competing answers to this question.

Atheists believe that at death one ceases to exist. There is no afterlife or eternal soul that continues in eternity. All there is to look forward to is our inevitable death, the future death of mankind, and the universe. It is in the face of this future that the atheist must seek to find meaning and purpose for his own existence.

The Eastern and New Age religions that hold to a pantheistic

worldview teach that one goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation until the cycle is broken and the person becomes one with the divine. What form a person becomes in the next life depends on the quality of life lived in the previous life. When one unites with the divine, he ceases to exist as an individual, but becomes part of the divine life force, like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

Those who hold to the animistic or tribal religions believe that after death the human soul remains on the earth or travels to join the departed spirits of the ancestors in the underworld, also called the realm of the shadows. For eternity they wander in darkness, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Some of the spirits of the deceased may be called upon to aid or torment those on earth.

Islam teaches that at the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise. The rest will be consigned to hell. The Koran teaches that in paradise men will be drinking wine and entertained by heavenly maidens and that they may take several of these maidens for their wives.

Most worldviews must accept their belief in the afterlife on *untested* faith, but the Christian hope is sure for two reasons; the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of God's Word. The Bible gives us the true view of what happens after death. However, many Christians have a misunderstanding of the afterlife. Some believe that they become one of the angels, others believe they go into a state of "soul sleep," while others believe they will be floating on clouds playing harps. In this article, we will examine some popular misconceptions of what lies beyond the grave and perceive what the Bible teaches.

Christians can be assured that death is not something to be feared. Instead, at death we arrive home in heaven. To live means we exist in a foreign country. Death has lost its sting

and now is a victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Near Death Experiences

For the past thirty years, thousands of people have reported experiencing what are called near death experiences (NDEs). NDEs are encounters where a person, being in full awareness, leaves the body and enters another world. Such experiences have resulted in life transformation in many individuals. What are we to make of these accounts?

Let us understand that NDEs come from those who have been *clinically* dead, not *biologically* dead. In clinical death, external life signs such as consciousness, pulse, and breathing cease. In such cases, biological death results if no steps are taken to reverse the process. Biological death, on the other hand, is not affected by any amount of attention, for it is physically irreversible.^{1}

The NDE accounts occur at various stages of clinical death. Some occur when the patient is comatose, very close to death, or pronounced clinically dead. Other accounts occur when the patient's heart stops beating. Others occur while the patient's brain ceases to register any activity on the EEG monitor. There have not been any cases of biological or irreversible death for a significant amount of time followed by a resurrection.

What has intrigued scientists and theologians in their study of NDEs is that many of the patients have similar experiences. These include leaving the body and watching from above as doctors work on it, entering a dark tunnel, seeing light, seeing others, meeting a spirit being, experiencing peace, and then returning to the body.

Scientists and doctors from various worldviews have sought to explain this phenomenon. Those from an atheistic worldview

have sought to give naturalistic explanations. Their explanations range from hallucination induced by medication, chemical reactions the brain experiences in near death crises, previous encounters long forgotten, and others. These fall short of explaining NDE events.

Many NDEs have occurred without medication. Drowning victims are one example. Also, thousands of NDE victims were able to clearly describe places and people with exact detail while they were clinically dead. One girl, while near dead, was able to describe what her family did that night at home, what was made for dinner, where everyone sat and even what was said. Others were able to describe in detail objects in rooms nearby and far away from them. One patient described a shoe on the rooftop of a hospital. When the nurses looked, they found the shoe exactly as described. A boy in an accident involving his brother and mother told those around him moments before he died, "They are waiting for me now." The doctor discovered that at that exact time in another hospital the boy's mother and brother had just died. Dr. Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland provide a comprehensive discussion of NDEs in their book *Beyond Death*, arguing that naturalistic explanations cannot satisfactorily explain the events that occur in NDEs.

NDEs may not conclusively prove there is a heaven or hell, but they do indicate that at death the soul separates from the body, and that a person's spirit is conscious and coherent at death.

However, NDEs do not accurately reflect what lies beyond the grave. NDEs deal with accounts that give a short glimpse behind the curtain of death and therefore they give us an incomplete picture. Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus "is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Christ overcame biological death and lives forevermore as ruler over all creation. His supremacy over everything was established through His resurrection. Also, we know that Satan masquerades as an angel

of light and can produce counterfeit appearances. It is imperative that we evaluate all experiences in light of Scripture.

Can We Communicate with the Dead?

Do the spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate with the living? One of the most popular current TV shows is "Crossing Over," with psychic John Edward. He, like other psychics, claims to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. He amazes spectators with his ability to reveal details about which only the deceased loved one may have known. From this communication, people attempt to receive comfort, advice, and encouragement.

The Bible teaches that communication with the dead is not possible. Throughout the Bible God commands His people not to indulge in the practice of necromancy, the art of communicating with the dead.

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 states,

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead . . .

The Canaanites consulted spirits and the dead in hopes of gaining power and predicting future events. This practice is an abomination to God and it is for this reason the Canaanites were ejected from the land. Israel was warned not to imitate the Canaanites or they too would suffer a similar fate.

Contacting the dead is forbidden because the spirits of the dead cannot contact the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him.

Who, then, are mediums and spiritists contacting? If they are indeed contacting a spiritual being, it is most likely a demonic counterfeit. Although the demonic spirit may communicate some truths, the ultimate intention of the spirit is to deceive and take one away from the Lord. This practice can ultimately lead to demonic possession and injury to the person.

In Acts 16:16 Paul encountered girl who could predict the future because a spirit possessed her. Knowing this, Paul eventually cast the spirit out of the girl. Throughout the Bible the practice of necromancy is forbidden.

Some will try to defend necromancy by pointing to 1 Samuel 28. Here Saul requests the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel from the grave. The spirit of Samuel arises and delivers a prophetic message to Saul. Bible scholars take two views on this. Some believe it was a demonic counterfeit masquerading as Samuel. I believe since the prophecy given came to pass, this was indeed Samuel the prophet. Despite Saul's disobedience to God, God made an exception here.

Whichever view you take, it is clear this verse does not encourage one to consult mediums. Saul at this point in his life was out of God's will and because the Spirit of God had left him, he could not receive any word from God. In desperation, he disobeyed God as was the pattern of his life and suffered the consequence. His story teaches us a lesson and is not an example to follow.

One Minute After Death

What happens when we breathe our final breath? The Bible teaches what will occur.

First our immaterial soul and spirit will be separated from our physical body. Second, we will immediately receive the judgment that will determine our eternal destiny. Those who

have trusted in Christ's payment on the cross for our sins will enter into eternal life in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 5:8 states, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." There will be no delay in a state of unconsciousness many call "soul sleep." We will immediately be in God's presence.

Second, the soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle with sin that Paul described and all Christians fight comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

Those who reject this gift, will receive what they have chosen, eternity separated from God in Hell. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." There is no second chance and there is no cycle of reincarnation. Our eternal destiny is determined by the decision we make for Christ here on earth.

Many assume that after receiving Christ all that remains is a joyful entrance into heaven. Scripture teaches that Jesus will reward us according to how we lived our life on earth. He taught this principle in the parable of the talents in Luke 19. Each servant was entrusted to administer the talents the master gave him. Upon the return of the master, each servant had to give an account for his stewardship. The wise servants were rewarded doubly while the wicked servant was removed.

The lesson for the Christian is that each of us will give an account for our time here on earth. This is not the same as being judged on our salvation status. Christ's death on the cross allows all who believe to enter God's kingdom. We will be judged on our works done since the time of our salvation. This judgment of believers is called the *Bema Seat judgment*. This event is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work, which he has built upon it, remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul states that Christ is our foundation. Our works are the building on this foundation. The materials of gold, silver, and precious stones refer to works done with pure motives for the glory of God. The works of wood, hay, and straw are works done with the wrong motives to glorify self.

At the Bema Seat, our works will be tested with divine fire. Those works that were done for the glory of God will endure the flames and will be our reward. Some will regretfully see all their works on earth burned up before their eyes and enter heaven with little or no reward.

The unbeliever will be judged and sentenced to hell. At the end of the age, he faces the Great White Throne judgment. Here, all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time are judged based on their rejection of the Savior. They are then thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Revelation 20:11-15 says:

And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; . . . and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Knowing that as Christians we will one day give an account for our lives, we should live as wise stewards over what God has given us. Knowing the fate of the unsaved should fill us with boldness to share Christ unashamedly, with urgency to all. Knowing what lies beyond the grave should motivate us to live life on earth with a mission.

What Will We Be Like in Heaven?

Upon our physical death, the soul is separated from the body and enters immediately into the presence of the Lord. Looking again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, he says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." The soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. As discussed above, Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle that Paul and all Christians fight with sin comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

We will not remain in heaven as a soul without a body. At God's appointed time, there will be a final resurrection where the spirit will be unified with the resurrected body. Although Christians have various views on when this resurrection will take place, we all agree on the resurrection of the body. What will the resurrected body look like?

Philippians 3:20-21 says, "And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." 1 John 3:2 promises, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

From these two passages we know that our glorified bodies will be like that of Christ. We will not be deified, but we will have the same qualities of His resurrection body. First, our

heavenly bodies will be our glorified earthly bodies. Christ's body that died on the cross was the same one that was resurrected. His glorified body was able to travel through walls, appear suddenly, and ascend to heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:1 reads, "[W]e have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." The hands of God will make the resurrected body. 1 Corinthians 15:39-40, 42b-43 tells us:

All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

In answering the mockers of the resurrection, Paul explains that our heavenly bodies will possess flesh that is of a different variety than our earthly ones. They will be bodies of flesh, but as different from our earthly bodies as humans are from animals.

We further conclude that, like a seed, the body will be sown or buried and then one day be raised to life. It is buried in death, decay, weakness, and dishonor. When it is resurrected, it will be changed in every way. It is raised imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. We will then have eternal, permanent, and perfected bodies.

We will also maintain our identities. In Luke 16:23, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham all retained their identity. Imagine, one day we will no longer struggle with the weakness of sin, sickness, and aging. A great future is in store for those in Christ.

What Will We Do in Heaven?

What will we do in heaven for all eternity? Some envision playing golf for eternity, while others envision saints floating on clouds strumming harps of gold. Although great thoughts, they fall short of the glorious future that actually awaits those in Christ. We are told relatively little about what activities will occur in heaven. We are only given a brief glimpse of our life to come.

First, the moment that saints of all the ages anticipate is seeing the Lord they served face to face. This will be the first and greatest moment after physical death. From then on we will have fellowship in His presence for all eternity.

Second, our life in heaven involves worship. A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:1-5:

After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. . . ." And again they shouted, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah." Then a voice came from the throne saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him both small and great."

Like the sound of roaring waters comes the praise from the saints of all ages. Recently the men from our church described the experience of singing the hymn How Great Thou Art at a Promise Keepers conference. Nothing they said could accurately describe that majestic experience. The closest they could come to putting it into words was, "Awesome! Just awesome!" Can you imagine what it will be like when we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" along with the saints of all ages in the presence of God? Our worship here is preparation for our future, grand worship in

heaven.

Third is the aspect of rest. Heavenly rest here does not mean a cessation from activity, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. In Hebrews 4:9-11 the writer, addressing the people of God states, "There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." Heaven is the final goal reached after our pilgrimage here on earth. We will rest from our sufferings and struggles against sickness, the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Fourth, we will serve the Lord. Luke 19:11-27 teaches a parable about stewardship. The wise servants who multiplied their master's talents were given rule over ten and five cities. Revelation 22:3 tells us, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him." In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul rebukes the carnal Christians who cannot settle their own disputes and asks them, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" In Revelation 3:21 the Lord Jesus promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne." Apparently we will be given authority over a sphere in God's eternal kingdom. How much we are given depends on our faithfulness to Him on this earth.

Fifth, we will experience fellowship with God and with one another. One of the most painful experiences in life is to say goodbye. Whether it is to see loved ones move to another residence or because of death, farewells are a painful time. For the Christian, there is hope in knowing, our goodbyes are not permanent. One day we will meet again and this time we will never say goodbye again. What awaits the believer after death is a glorious future that cannot truly be imagined!

Notes

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The Council of Nicea

Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.

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

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."^{1} So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to " . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those

outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.[{2}](#) Another writes, "The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible."[{3}](#)

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, "Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son" (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and

Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

Arius

Let's look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."[\[4\]](#) He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."[\[5\]](#)

Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should

be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he “served their God.”^{6} It seems that Constantine’s involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, “My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . .”^{7} This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if

he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine's active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death." {8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this

might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to be asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius.

Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.^{10} Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."^{11}

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

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