The Meaning of the Cross

Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ" has brought the topic of Jesus' suffering and death into the national conversation. Rick Wade explores the meaning of the cross.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A Scandal At the Center

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created quite a bit of controversy, both inside the church and out. One objection from Christians is that the film is imbalanced for not giving due attention to the resurrection of Jesus. There is at least one reason I disagree. That is because, as theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, the focus today is primarily on the resurrection, and the cross takes second place.{1} I recall Carl Henry, the late theologian, noting in the 1980s that the emphasis in evangelicalism had shifted from justification by faith to the new life. We talk often about the positive differences Christianity can make in our lives because of the resurrection. Gibson has forced us to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. And that's a good thing.

Before the foundation of the world, it was established that redemption would be accomplished through Jesus' death (Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Peter wrote that we were "ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Isaiah 53:5 reads: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

But what a way to save the world! It flies in the face of common sense! From the time of Christ, the crucifixion as the basis of our salvation has been a major problem. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are

perishing," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18a). The Greeks saw the cross as foolishness (literally, "moronic"), for they believed that truth was discovered through wisdom or reason. For the Jews it was a scandal, a stumbling block, for they couldn't believe God would save through a man accursed. They asked for signs, but instead got a crucified Messiah.

In modern times the cross was a problem because it meant we could not save ourselves through our own ingenuity. In postmodern times, while many young people feel an affinity with Jesus in His suffering, they have a hard time accepting that this is the only way God saves. And the atonement was much more than a simple identification with suffering humanity.

It is easy for us to rush past the cross and focus on the empty tomb in our evangelism. Think about it. How many of us make the cross central in our witness to unbelievers? The new life of the resurrection is a much easier "sell" than the suffering of the cross. We want to present a Gospel that is appealing to the hearer that grabs people's attention and immediately makes them want it.

In our apologetics, our arguments and evidence must be presented in terms unbelievers understand while yet not letting unbelievers set the standards for us. Paul was an educated man, and he had the opportunity to show off his intellectual abilities with the philosophers in Corinth. But Paul wouldn't play the game on their turf. He wouldn't rest the Gospel on philosophical speculation as a system of belief more elegant and persuasive than the philosophies of the Greeks. In fact, he unashamedly proclaimed a very unelegant, even repulsive sounding message. He knew the scandal of the cross better than most, but he didn't shy away from it. He made it central.

A key word today among Christians is "relevant." We want a message that is relevant to contemporary society. But in our

search for relevance, we can unwittingly let our message be molded by what current fashion considers relevant. We become confused between showing the relevance of the Gospel to our true situation and making the Gospel relevant by shaping it to fit the sensibilities of our neighbors.

Os Guinness had this to say about relevance:
By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.{2}

Guinness doesn't deny the relevance of the Gospel. Indeed, it is part of our task to show how it is of ultimate relevance to our situation as fallen people. If the message of Scripture is true—that we are lost and in need of a salvation we cannot secure on our own—then there is nothing more relevant than the cross of Christ. For that was God's answer to our problem. But it is relevant to our true situation as God sees it, not according to our situation as we see it.

Sin and Guilt in Modern Times

The cross of Christ addresses directly the matter of sin. But what does that mean? Do people "sin" anymore? What a silly question, you think. But is it? Of course, we all agree that people do things we call "bad". But what is the nature of this "badness"? Is it really sin? Or, is something "bad" just something inconvenient or harmful to me? Or maybe a simple violation of civil laws? Sin is a word used to describe a violation of God's holiness and law. While the majority of people in our country still believe in God, the consensus about what makes for right and wrong is that we are the ones to decide that, that there is no transcendent law. If there is

no transcendent law, however, what are we to make of guilt? Is there such a thing as objective guilt? What do we make of subjective guilt—of guilt feelings?

As the battles of World War I raged in Europe, P.T. Forsyth reflected on the question of God and evil and the meaning of history. He reviewed the ways people had sought peace and unity and found them all wanting. Reason, basic emotions or sympathies, the fundamental workings of nature, and faith in progress all were found wanting. Turning back in history he could find no "plan of beneficent progress looking up through man's career."{3} Anytime it seemed enlightenment had come, it would be crushed by war. In his own day, World War I dashed the rosy-eyed hopes of progress being voiced. He said, "As we become civilised [sic], we grow in power over everything but ourselves, we grow in everything but power to control our power over everything."{4} But what if we looked to the future? Could hope be found there? If the past couldn't bring in a reign of love and unity, he asked, why should we expect the future to? What is there to make sense of the world we know?

The problem was, and is, a moral one, Forsyth said. "All deep and earnest experience shows us, and not Christianity alone, that the unity of the race lies in its moral centre, its moral crisis, and its moral destiny." What could possibly deal adequately with the guilt, "the last problem of the race"?{5} Is there anything in the history of our race that offers hope?

From the beginning, the church has taught that our fundamental problem is sin, and the cross of Christ provides hope that sin can and will one day be overcome. In modern times, however, the concept of "sin" seems rather quaint, a hold-over from the days of simplistic religious beliefs. Arthur Custance writes:

> The concept of sin is largely outmoded in modern secular thinking because sin implies some form of disobedience against an absolute moral law having to do with man's

> relationship with God, and not too many people believe any such relationship exists. It would not be the same as social misconduct which has to do with man's relationship to man and is highly relative but obviously cannot be denied. We have reached the point where social custom has displaced the law of God as the point of reference, where mores have replaced morals.{6}

We seem to be caught between two poles. On the one hand, we accept the Darwinist belief in our accidental and even materialistic nature—really no more than organic machines. On the other, we can't rid ourselves of the thought that there's something transcendent about us, something about us which is other than and even greater than our physical bodies which relates to a transcendent realm of some kind. We recognize in ourselves a moral nature that expresses itself through our conscience. In short, we know we do wrong things, and we know others do them, too. The problem is that we don't seem to know the nature and extent of the problem nor its solution. Many believe that there is no God against whom we sin, or if there is a God, He is too loving to hold our mistakes against us.

From a historical perspective, this is quite a turn-about, says Custance:

> Throughout history there has never been a society like our own in which the reality of sin has been so generally denied. Even in the worst days of the Roman Empire men felt the need to propitiate the gods, not so much because they had an exalted view of the gods but because they had a more realistic view of their own worthiness. It is a curious thing that even some of the cruelest of the Roman Emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, for example, were very conscious of themselves as sinners. We may call it superstition, but it was a testimony to a very real sense of inward unworthiness which was not based on man's relationship to man but rather man's relationship to the gods.{7}

On the other hand, despite the contemporary dismissal of sin, guilt is still a constant presence in the human psyche. Karl Menninger writes:

> I believe there is a general sentiment that sin is still with us, by us, and in us—somewhere. We are made vaguely uneasy by this consciousness, this persistent sense of guilt, and we try to relieve it in various ways. We project the blame on to others, we ascribe the responsibility to a group, we offer up scapegoat sacrifices, we perform or partake in dumb-show rituals of penitence and atonement. There is rarely a peccavi [confession of sin or guilt], but there's a feeling.{8}
> "This is a phenomenon of our day," writes Custance: "a burden of guilt but no sense of sin."{9}

But to what is the nature of this guilt? If there is no objective moral law that stands outside and above us all, what is guilt and who is guilty? Who judges us?

In the film, *A Walk on the Moon*, Pearl begins to have an affair with a traveling salesman. Pearl's husband, Marty, is a good man, but a bit of a square. It's 1969; Woodstock is about to make the news. And Pearl, who got pregnant by Marty when she was 17, is feeling a need to experiment, to capture what she missed by having to get married and starting the family life so early. When Pearl's affair is discovered, her husband is distraught. So is her daughter, Alison, who saw Pearl with her lover at Woodstock behaving like the teenagers around them. She's broken up that her mother might leave them.

But in all that happens following Pearl's confession, there is no mention of her affair being morally wrong. When she confessed, she told Marty she was sorry. Later, she told him she was sorry she'd hurt him. But her deed was at least somewhat excusable because there were things Pearl wanted to try, and her husband was too square, he didn't listen, he made jokes when she tried to suggest experimenting, especially

sexually. Even in her interactions with others, there is no mention of her act being morally wrong. When Alison told Pearl she had seen her at Woodstock, her complaint was that she was the teenager, not Pearl (implying it would be okay for Alison to go wild at Woodstock but not Pearl). Pearl's mother-in-law pointed out what the early marriage cost Marty: a college education promised by Marty's boss, who withdrew the offer when Pearl got pregnant. "Do you think you're the only one with dreams that didn't come through?" she asked.

So the affair was understandable given Marty's old-fashioned ways (which he shows to be shedding by switching the radio from a big band station to rock station, and when he's shown dancing to Jimi Hendrix on the stereo). The problem was the hurt Pearl cost a good man and a teenage girl. And that's about all there is to sin and guilt anymore.

According to one modern view, guilt is nature's way of teaching us what not to do in the future that has caused us problems in the past. Dr. Glenn Johnson, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, said "Guilt seems to be a very primitive mental mechanism that was programmed into us to protect us in the future from mistakes we made in the past." It is a "simple debriefing and rehearsal process that the mind engages in after perceiving that something negative has taken place and has caused painful and/or anxious feelings. . . . By forcing repeated reviews of a painful experience and the behaviors and elements leading up to it and associated with it, guilt essentially burns into our brains the connection between our behavior and the uncomfortable feelings we feel."{10}

What can we do about guilt? According to Dr. Johnson, the issue is behavior and what might need to be changed to prevent future problems for us. "When guilt is appropriate," says Dr. Johnson, "tell yourself that. You might modify intensity with anti-anxiety medications or relaxation exercises—but if the bulk of the guilt feelings are avoided, so will the learning be." In other words, learn from your mistakes. Inappropriate,

excessive guilt, says Dr. Johnson, can be dealt with using "hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery, NLP, Reiki, etc. . . . The focus of the self-help stuff should be on letting one's self grow from experience," he says, "trusting in one's own ability to be a better person, allowing one's self permission to make mistakes and go through losses, trusting in some form of higher power, etc."

People come up with all kinds of ways to rid themselves of guilt feelings. One of the strangest I found on the internet, one with a New Age flavor, was Aromatherapy Angelic Bath Kits provided by Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc.{11} All one needs to do is pour some special herbs and oils in the tub, climb in, and read some prescribed meditations to "foster positive thoughts and reinforcements."{12} One of these kits is a "ritual to clear feelings of guilt." We're asked, "Who hasn't felt guilty in their lives? Who doesn't still feel guilty about something? There are two kinds of guilt: good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt is when you have truly done something that you feel remorse for. Bad guilt is for the rest." The forgiveness kit includes "special mixtures [which] help wash the guilty feeling away." Notice that "good guilt" has to do with things "you feel remorse for," not necessarily for things that are truly wrong. It's your feelings about such things that matter.{13} This may seem silly to you. Who would even bother with such a thing? we wonder. But people do.

Somehow, such remedies don't seem to be working. Maybe it's because we can't rid ourselves of the knowledge Paul said we have by nature: a knowledge of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).

Sin and Guilt According to God

What does God say about sin and guilt? Briefly put, God has declared us guilty of violating His holy law by our sin and deserving of eternal banishment from His presence. Contrary to current opinion, there is transcendent law that has been

broken and for which there must be payment.

Imagine that someone has done something to offend you, and his reaction to your complaint is something like, “Yeah, that really bothered me, too. But I’ve forgiven myself of that, and I’m fine with it now.” This is only a slight caricature of the mentality we all encounter today. The person clearly has missed the point that there was a real, objective violation against you!

The message of the cross is that there is a very real fracture in our relationship with God. We’re told in Scripture that there is nothing we can do to make up for what we’ve done. Is there anything to offer us hope?

There is: the cross of Christ, “the race’s historic crisis and turning-point,” says Forsyth.{14} The cross dealt with our greatest need, namely, redemption. Humanists of a secular stripe who trumpeted the inevitable progress of humanity saw our fundamental nature as one of ordered process. The truth, though, is that it is “tragic collision and despair.” All of man’s efforts have been unable to reach down into the depths of our sinfulness and bring about fundamental change. All except that of the God-man Jesus Christ, who attacked the moral problem head on to the point of dying on the cross and came out victorious.

Several understandings of the atonement—what Jesus accomplished on the cross—have been offered through history, and several of them have some truth in them. The key aspect of Christ’s cross work was that it satisfied the demand for punishment for our sin. This is called substitutionary atonement: Jesus was substituted for us, so He took the punishment for sin in being separated from God and dying, thus paying the penalty for us. “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul wrote to the Romans that “what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness

of sinful man to be a sin offering." (Romans 8:3) And to the Galatian church he said that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

By His death on the cross, Jesus, the one who "knew no sin, became sin for us." This was done because of His love for us: "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2; Rom. 5:8) Jesus' sacrifice is appropriated by faith: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul wrote (Eph. 2:8). By putting our faith in Him, we participate in the payment He made. It counts for those who believe it and who receive Him.

I should note quickly, however, that the reality of our objective guilt isn't dependent upon our subjective guilt. In other words, whether we feel guilty or not, we are. And because we are guilty of violating God's law, we must do more than just forgive ourselves as we're taught today. We must, and may, participate in God's solution through Christ.

The Moral Triumph of the Cross

What I've been talking about is the judicial aspect of the cross work of Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

However, this payment isn't to be thought of like making a payment to the utility company for electricity. All that matters is that the money gets there. What it takes to get it there isn't really significant. The cross, by contrast, was a triumph over sin; it was a moral victory in itself. Jesus overcame evil through His perfect obedience and righteousness; "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," Paul wrote (Rom. 5:18). His death on the cross was the capstone of a life of moral victories over sin and Satan.

We're so used to thinking about Jesus as God and as sinless that we don't often think about His obedience. He said and did the things the Father told Him (Jn. 5:19, 30; 8:28). To the Jews he said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." (v. 4) Before He gave up His spirit on the cross, Jesus knew that "all things had already been accomplished." (Jn 19:28) He fulfilled the law perfectly (Matt. 5:17), and thus put the basis of our salvation on our faith in him as the one who did so, thus robbing the law of its power to encourage us to sin (cf. Rom. 8:2-4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). Jesus had defeated Satan; He had not given in to any temptation to not give up His life. He was obedient to death. (Phil. 2:8). And by His obedience He was made perfect or complete and able to be the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9; see also 2:10; 5:8; and Rom. 5:19).

P.T. Forsyth wrote that the cross "is the moral victory which recovered the universe. The Vindicator has stood on the earth," he said. "It is the eternal victory in history of righteousness, of holiness, of the moral nature and character of God as Love."{15} He continued:

> The most anomalous thing, the most poignant and potent crisis that ever happened or can happen in the world, is the death of Christ; the whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil met there for good and all. And to faith that death is the last word of the holy omnipotence of God.{16}

What is the significance of Jesus' cross work—indeed, His whole life—as a moral victory? Forsyth said that in creating the world, God revealed His omnipotence, His absolute power. In the new creation inaugurated through the cross, He revealed

His moral power, His ability to triumph over His worst enemy, Satan, and the sin that infects His creation. God's power has been revealed as "moral majesty, as holy omnipotence" said Forsyth. "The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of a God but of a holy God."{17}

In the cross and resurrection, we see that good can triumph over evil now, and we have the promise that one day that triumph will be complete. Not only us but all of creation will be set free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-24).

But this isn't just a promise for the future. Because, like Jesus, we have the Spirit living in us, we can live in obedience to God; we can stand firm in the presence of the evil that wages war against us (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20). The cross bears witness to that.

The secular humanism and new spiritualism of our day have no resources for affecting us so deeply on the moral level. Christianity does—the cross of Christ—and it is this that makes it relevant for our day and for all time.

A Fully-Engaged God

It's easy to think of God as remote from us, as a judge way up there making His laws and wreaking vengeance on anyone who violates them. We hear about the love of God, but how does love fit in with a God of judgment? And if God does love us, how does He show it? Love comes near; it isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Is God willing to come near? To get His hands dirty with us?

In the cross of Jesus we see both the judgment of God and His love. Herein lies its beauty. In the cross we find a God who does not stand afar off, but takes on the worst of what His own law requires! He has pronounced judgment, but He so much wants us saved that He is willing to take on the burden of paying for it Himself. "For God so loved the world that He

gave His Son," says John (3:16).

In all the brouhaha surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, one complaint heard several times was that a God who would put His Son through that isn't a God to be worshipped.{18} But Jesus did this freely. "No one takes [my life] from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn.10:18). And He did this knowing that as He laid His life down, so also would He take it up again (Jn.10:17). For the joy set before Him, He took up the cross (Heb. 12:2).

We wonder if God can reach us in the messiness of our lives. But God is no stranger to mess. The Bible reveals a God who isn't afraid to get dirty, who engages life even with all kinds of difficulties it may bring. This message is appealing in our day especially, to GenXers who have suffered the fallout of the excesses of earlier generations. The optimism Boomers inherited from their parents fizzled out for a lot of their children. Regarding that generation, Tom Beaudoin says this:

> I have witnessed a sadness and anger about the generation's suffering and dysfunction, a suffering that—whatever its economic reasons may be—expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism. Xers' relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. . . . Suffering is a catalyst for GenX religiosity.{19}

While they often reject the form of religion their parents embraced, many GenXers have a fascination and respect for Jesus, for his suffering didn't make sense, and yet it was redemptive.{20}

Here the true awesomeness of the cross is made plain. God, who deserves all glory and is so far above us in holiness and

purity, became man, and endured horrific torture at the hands of people He created . . . for their benefit! The life and death of Christ make plain that God was willing to roll up his sleeves and engage life on earth fully, even accepting the worst it had to offer.

But, one might wonder, since Christ took on evil and won, shouldn't we be done with suffering? Eventually it will end. In the meantime we, too, learn obedience through what we suffer. If that was Jesus' way of learning, and the servant isn't above his master (Matt. 10:24), can we expect anything else? Furthermore, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that hardship isn't just an inconvenience on the road of discipleship. Redemption wasn't brought about in spite of the cross but through it.{21} Likewise, our growth comes not in spite of hardship but through it.

Someone who has suffered for many years might complain that Jesus' suffering doesn't compare. Jesus' sufferings and resurrection spanned a short period of time. But what He suffered was the experience of the weight of the guilt of the whole world on the shoulders of one who was sinless. It isn't anything new for us to feel guilt; we can become somewhat hardened to it. But Jesus felt it to the fullest extent imaginable. This isn't to mention the hurt of the betrayal of Judas (and to a lesser extent, of Peter). Worse yet, He experienced separation from the Father, the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Jesus knew suffering.

In the cross and resurrection we see what God has promised to do for us in a compressed timeframe. But what happened to Jesus will happen for all who believe. He suffered . . . and He arose. We suffer . . . and we will rise.

Jesus allowed people to see what God is like. He not only taught truth, he lived it. People could touch Him, and feel Him touch them. They could see how He lived and how He died. The cross was a real, live illustration of love.

In Jesus, people saw goodness and love demonstrated even toward those who persecuted Him. That should be no surprise, because it was just that kind of person Jesus came to die for! Sin was overcome through a love that gave all. This is the meaning and the message of the cross, the message we, too, are to take to our world.

Notes

1. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 28ff.

2. Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 15.

3. P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 17.

4. Forsyth, 18.

5. Forsyth, 19.

6. Arthur C. Custance, *The Doorway Papers,* vol. 3, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1975), 267.

7. Custance, 274.

8. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 17.

9. Custance, 273.

10. Dr. Glenn Johnson, head-cleaners.com, www.head-cleaners.com/guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

11. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/wellness_about.htm (February 17, 2004).

12. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/ritual_package.htm (February 17, 2004).

13. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/rituals_guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).

14. Forsyth, 19.

15. Forsyth, 121.

16. Forsyth, 122.

17. See Forsyth, 123.

18. See for example the comment by Kip Taylor in Susan Hogan/Albach, "The Purpose of the Passion," *The Dallas Morning News,* Feb. 21, 2004, 1G.

19. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 99.

20. Beaudoin, 99.

21. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

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Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

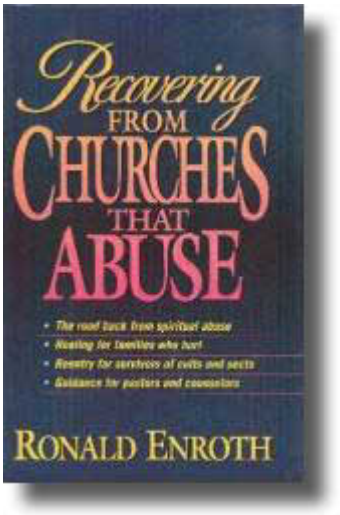
Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at

how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Painful Exit Process

In a previous article Abusive Churches, I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.{1} As a result of the questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.



Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.

One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, "I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It's like experiencing a death in the family." The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, "Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."{2}

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have

difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label “role exit.” Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a “vacuum.” In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member wrote, “I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don’t know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all together.”{3}

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.{4} Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled “spiritually abusive” range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe

cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don't ask questions and don't make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son's wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel

guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter's prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One's spiritual quality is determined by one's allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas? Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the "sinful" world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a "true disciple," abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: "The greatest threat to the church today is

not from without but from our own leadership within."{5} Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, "I have heard many pastors say to their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them."{7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the

truth. “Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims.”{8} Blue continues: “Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism.”{9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a “pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt.”{10}

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ’s example. “Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all” (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful

way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader's heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God's flock as a steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse,* and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith,* provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don’t give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and

wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God's character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that "God is love." In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God's grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However,

a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.{11}

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."{12} It is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "Abusive Churches," 1993, Probe Ministries.

2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse,* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits,* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

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The Doctrine of Revelation: How God Reveals His Nature and His Will

Rick Wade considers how God reveals his nature and his will to mankind. He finds that God clearly speaks to us through His creation and through His thoughts communicated in special revelation (includes His spoken word, His written word, and His Son).

Revelation and the God Who Speaks

Some years ago the pastor of the church I attended was on a

nationally syndicated radio program with another pastor of a more liberal bent. They were discussing differences of understanding about Christianity, one of which was the nature of the Bible. My pastor asserted that Scripture is the inspired, revealed Word of God. The other pastor disagreed, saying that the Bible is a collection of the religious reflections of a particular group of people. Since it was a call-in program, I phoned at that point and asked the question, "If the Bible is just the religious ideas of a group of people and isn't from God, how can we know whether what *we* think is true Christianity is what *God* thinks it is?" The pastor said something about how we have other ways of knowing truth, and the program ended. Not a very satisfying answer.

The issue being dealt with was the nature of Scripture. Is it the religious reflection of sincere people expressing truth about God the best they can? Or is it the revealed word of God?

In another article I dealt with the matter of the inspiration of Scripture. In this article I want to look at the doctrine of revelation. Not the *book*, Revelation, at the end of the New Testament, but the *doctrine* of revelation.

Revelation: What makes the Bible more than just religious writings

What *is* revelation? New Testament scholar Leon Morris quotes *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.* Revelation, it says, is "'The disclosure of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency', and secondly, 'Something disclosed or made known by divine or supernatural means.'" Says Morris:

> *Theologians might hesitate over this concentration on knowledge, for some of them would certainly prefer to define revelation in terms of the disclosure of a person. But the point on which we fasten our attention is the word*

> *'disclosure'. Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover.*[1]

Thus, revelation is knowledge we can have no other way than by being told.

Here one might ask the question, Does it make sense to think God might reveal Himself? What we see in Scripture is a God Who speaks. God walked and talked with Adam in the "cool of the day" (Gen. 2:8ff). Later, He spoke to Abraham and then to the prophets of Israel. In the Incarnation of Christ He spoke directly, as man to man, face to face. Along the way He inspired His prophets and apostles to write His words to man.

This makes perfect sense. First, we know things in keeping with their nature. So, for example, we know the color of something by looking at it. We know distances by measuring. We know love by the good it produces. Along the same lines, we know persons by what they reveal about themselves. God is a Person, and there are things we can only know about Him if He tells us Himself. Second, God is transcendent, high above us. We cannot know Him unless He condescends to speak to us. Third, since God created rational, communicative beings, the idea that He would communicate with them in a rational way is not unreasonable.

Today, people look here and there for answers to the big questions of life—some consciously looking for God, some just looking for any truth on which they can depend. The doctrine of revelation teaches us that rather than wait for us to find God, God has found us. And He has revealed Himself to us in words we can understand.

General Revelation

Revelation comes to us in two basic forms: general or natural revelation, and special revelation. Let's look at the first of these.

Through what has been made

General revelation is God's Word given through the created order. Everyone is exposed to general revelation just by virtue of living in and being part of creation. In Psalm 19 we read, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (vv. 1–4). This idea is reiterated in Romans 1 where Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature— have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (v. 20). Says Leon Morris, "A reverent contemplation of the physical universe with its order and design and beauty tells us not only that God is but also that God is a certain kind of God."{2}

If God can be known through creation in general, then it's reasonable to think He can be known through man himself in particular as part of the created order. God has left His imprint on those made in His image. Theologian Bruce Demarest follows John Calvin in his belief that we all have an immediate knowledge of God based on our being made in His image and on common grace.{3} Our own characteristics of personality, rationality and morality say something about God.

What can be known through general revelation

What do we know about God through general revelation? Demarest says that through nature we know that God is uncreated (Acts

17:24), the Creator (Acts 14:15), the Sustainer (Acts 14:16; 17:25), the universal Lord (Acts 17:24), self-sufficient (Acts 17:25), transcendent (Acts 17:24), immanent (Acts 17:26–27), eternal (Ps. 93:2), great (Ps. 8:3–4), majestic (Ps. 29:4), powerful (Ps. 29:4; Rom. 1:20), wise (Ps. 104:24), good (Acts 14:17), and righteous (Rom. 1:32); He has a sovereign will (Acts 17:26), has standards of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15), and should be worshiped (Acts 14:15;17:23).{4} Furthermore, we all have some knowledge of God's morality through nature (Rom. 2:15).

Other religions

It is because of general revelation that other religions often contain some truth about God. Remember that Paul said everyone knows God exists through what He has made, but that this knowledge is suppressed by our unrighteousness. They "exchanged the truth of God for a lie," he said, "and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1: 25). Nonetheless, snippets of truth can be detected in non-Christian religions. "For example," writes Bruce Demarest, "the Yoruba people of Nigeria have a name for God, 'Osanobwa,' that means 'he who blesses and sustains the world.' The Taro people, also of Nigeria, after a time of barrenness often call a baby girl 'Nyambien,' meaning 'God is good.' The Ibo people of Nigeria denote God as 'Eze-elu,' or 'the King above.' And the Mende people of Liberia designate God as the Chief, the King of all Kings.{5} The Gogo people of West Africa believe that Mulungu governs 'the destiny of man sending rain and storm, well-being and famine, health or disease, peace or war. He is the Healer.'{6} The Yoruba people say that in the afterlife the person-soul, the Oli, will give account of itself before Olodumare the supreme God. Since, as anthropologists testify, these convictions appear to have been arrived at apart from Christian or Muslim teaching, they must derive from God's universal general revelation in nature, providence, and the implanted moral law."{7}

What can't be known

If all this *can* be known through nature, is there anything that *can't*? Yes there is. Although through nature we can know some things *about* God, we cannot know how to get to *know* God personally, how to find redemption and reconciliation. This is why there had to be *special* revelation.

Special Revelation

As I have noted, God has revealed Himself through nature, but through nature we cannot know how to be reconciled to God. God had to speak in a special way to tell us how we may be redeemed. "Special revelation is redemptive revelation," says Carl Henry. "It publishes the good tidings that the holy and merciful God promises salvation as a divine gift to man who cannot save himself (OT) and that he has now fulfilled that promise in the gift of his Son in whom all men are called to believe (NT). The gospel is news that the incarnate Logos has borne the sins of doomed men, has died in their stead, and has risen for their justification. This is the fixed center of special redemptive revelation."{8}

Personal

What is the nature of special revelation? First we should note that it is the communication of one Person to other persons. It isn't simply a series of propositions setting forth a theological system. This is why special revelation finds its culmination in Jesus, for in Him we are confronted with the Person of God. We'll talk more about this later.

Verbal and Propositional

It has been the understanding of the church historically that God has spoken verbally to His creatures. Words have been exchanged; rational ideas have been put forward in understandable sentences. Not *all* revelation is easy to understand, of course. Meaning is sometimes shrouded in

mystery. But important truths are made clear.

That God would reveal Himself through verbal revelation isn't surprising. First, He is a *Person*, and persons communicate with other persons with a desire to extend and receive information. Second, His clear desire is to make friends with us. He wants to restore us to a proper relationship with Him. It's hard to imagine a friendship between two people who don't communicate clearly with one another.

Implicit in this understanding of revelation is the belief that it contains propositional truths; that is, statements that are informative and have truth value.

This isn't to say the Bible is only propositions. Douglas Groothuis notes that it also contains questions, imperatives, requests, and exclamations. However, in the words of Carl Henry: "Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these [biblical] writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false."{9} So when Jeremiah says that God "has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!" (32:17), we know that the image of God's "arm" speaks of His power active in His creation. The truth "God acts with power in His creation" is behind the imagery.

Modern ideas

In recent centuries, however, as confidence in man's reason overshadowed confidence in God's ability to communicate, the understanding of revelation has undergone change. Some hold that revelation is to be understood in terms of *personal encounter,* of God encountering people so as to leave them with a "liberating assurance. . . .This assurance – 'openness to the future', Bultmann called it – was equated with faith."{10} Such an encounter can come as a result of reading Scripture, but Scripture itself isn't the verbal revelation of God. Even

in evangelical churches where the Bible is preached as God's Word written, people sometimes put more faith in their "relationship" with God than in what God has said. "Don't worry me with doctrine," is the attitude. "I just want to have a relationship with Jesus." It's fine to have a relationship with Jesus. But try to imagine a relationship between two people here on earth in which no information is exchanged.

Those who hold this view draw a line between the personal and the propositional as if they cannot mix. In his evaluation, J.I. Packer says that this is an absurd idea.

> *"Revelation is certainly more than the giving of theological information, but it is not and cannot be less. Personal friendship between God and man grows just as human friendships do – namely, through talking; and talking means making informative statements, and informative statements are propositions. . . . To say that revelation is non-propositional is actually to depersonalize it. . . . To maintain that we may know God without God actually speaking to us in words is really to deny that God is personal, or at any rate that knowing Him is a truly personal relationship."{11}*

Another idea about the Bible in particular which has become commonplace in liberal theology is that the Bible is the product of the inspired ideas of men (a "quickening of conscience"{12}) rather than truths inspired by God. If this were the case, however, one might expect the Bible to give hints that it is just the religious reflections of men. But the witness of Scripture throughout is that it is the message of God *from* God. Here we don't see men simply reflecting on life and the world and drawing conclusions about God. Rather, we're confronted by a God who steps into people's lives, speaking words of instruction or promise or condemnation.

Modes of Special Revelation

Special revelation has taken different forms: the spoken Word, the written Word, and the Word made flesh.

Spoken Word

In the Garden of Eden, God spoke to Adam directly. (Gen. 3:8ff) He spoke to Abraham (e.g. Gen. 12:1–3), to Moses (Ex. 3:4ff), and to many prophets of the nation of Israel following that. Amos said that God did nothing "without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. . . . The Lord has spoken," he said. "Who can but prophesy?" (3:7–8) Prophets were primarily forth-tellers, relaying God's Word to those for whom it was intended.{13}

Written word

God also had His prophets write down what He said. The writings of Moses were kept in the Tabernacle (Dt. 31:24–26), read in the hearing of the Israelites (Dt. 31:11), and kept as references by future kings of Israel (Dt. 17:18ff). They are quoted throughout the OT (Josh. 1:7; 1 Kings 2:3; Mal.4:4). Joshua put his teachings of God's ordinances with "the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:26), and Samuel did the same (1 Sam. 10:25). The writer of Chronicles spoke of those earlier writings (1 Chron. 29:29), and later, Daniel referred to these books (Dan. 9:2,6,11). Solomon's proverbs and songs are mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32. The writing of the New Testament took a much shorter time than the Old Testament, so we don't see generations down the line referring back to the writings of their fathers. But we do see Peter speaking of the writings of Paul (2 Pe. 3:15–16), and Paul referring (it appears) to Luke's writings in 1 Tim. 5:18.

Word made flesh

So God has spoken, and His words have been written down. The third mode is the Word made flesh. The writer of Hebrews says

that, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . .” (1:1-2a) All God’s will wasn’t given at once; it came in portions at various times. J.I. Packer says, “Then, in New Testament times, just as all roads were said to lead to Rome, so all the diverse and seemingly divergent strands of Old Testament revelation were found to lead to Jesus Christ.”{14}

Jesus has been the mediator of revelation since the beginning. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27) Peter says it was the Spirit of Christ who spoke through the Old Testament prophets. (1 Pe. 1:11) But these were God’s words given through men. In the Incarnation we received the fullest expression of His word directly. Jesus was and is the Word made flesh. (John 1:1,14)

Jesus is the supreme revelation because He is one with the Father: He is God speaking. He spoke the words the Father taught Him. (John 12:49; 14:10), and He summed up his ministry with the phrase “I have given them your word.” (John 17:14) Abraham Kuyper summed it up beautifully: “Christ does not argue, he *declares;* he does not demonstrate, he *shows* and *illustrates*; he does not analyze, but with enrapturing symbolism *unveils* the truth.”{15}

But Jesus doesn’t reveal God just in His words but also in His person – in His character and the way He lived. Says the late Bernard Ramm: “The attitudes, action, and dispositions of Christ so mirrored the divine nature that to have seen such in Christ is to have seen the reflection of the divine nature.” He continues:

> *Christ’s attitudes mirror the Father’s attitudes; Christ’s affections mirror the Father’s affections; Christ’s love mirrors the Father’s love. Christ’s impatience with unbelief is the divine impatience with unbelief. Christ’s wrath upon*

> *hypocrisy is the divine wrath upon hypocrisy. Christ's tears over Jerusalem is the divine compassion over Jerusalem. Christ's judgment upon Jerusalem or upon the Pharisees is the divine judgment upon such hardness of heart and spiritual wickedness.{16}*

As the Son spoke the Word of the Father so clearly because He knows perfectly the mind of the Father, so He also reflected the character of the Father being of the same nature.

In Christ, also, we see revelation as *event.* He carried out the will of the Father, thus revealing things about the Father. The cross not only accomplished our redemption; it also demonstrated the love of God. Jesus revealed God's glory in changing the water to wine in Cana (John 2:11) and in His resurrection (Rom. 6:4).

The total redeeming work of Christ, therefore, revealed the Father in word, in character, and in deed.

Modern Hurdles

There are a couple of ways modern thought has served to undermine our confidence in the Bible as the written revelation of God. One way has to do with the knowability of historical events; another with the final authority for truth.

First, the matter of history and knowledge. In the Enlightenment era, philosophers such as Ren Descartes taught that only those ideas that could be held without doubt could count as knowledge. This created a problem for Scripture, for its major doctrines were revealed through *historical events*, and the knowledge of history is open to doubt logically speaking. History is constantly changing. Because of such change, the different contexts of those living long ago and of the historian negatively affects the historian's ability to truly comprehend the past. At best, historical knowledge can only be probable. Religious ideas, on the other hand, seemed

to be eternal; they are fixed and unchanging. It was believed that they could be known through reason better than through historical accounts. The classic statement of this position was made by the eighteenth century German, Gotthold Lessing, when he said, "The accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."{17} ("Accidental" means just the opposite of necessary; such things didn't logically have to happen as they did.)

Thus, biblical teachings were put on the side of probability, of opinion, rather than on the side of *knowledge*. Since it was thought that religious truths *ought* to be on the side of logical *certainty* and *knowledge*, people began to wonder whether the Bible could truly be the revelation of God.

The fact is, however, that we *can* know truth through historical texts; we find it there all the time. I *know* I was born in December of 1955 and that George Washington was our first president – even though these truths aren't what we call logically *necessary*, such as with mathematical equations. Although historical knowledge as such doesn't give the rational certainty our Enlightenment forebears might have wanted, it doesn't have to in order to be counted as knowledge.{18} Knowledge doesn't *have* to be logically *necessary* in order to be *trustworthy*.{19} There is no reason God cannot make Himself known through the lives of people and nations, or that the historical records of that revelation cannot convey objective truth to subsequent generations.

Nonetheless, confidence in Scripture was weakened. Wherein shall our confidence lie, then, with respect to religious matters? If we can't know truth through historical accounts, but must rely on our own reason, our reason becomes supreme over Scripture. The authority for truth lies within us, not in the Bible.

This subjectivity is the second outgrowth of the Enlightenment that affects our understanding of revelation and the Bible.

Now it is *I* who have final authority for what is true. For some people it is our *reason* that is supreme. The philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught that God speaks through our reason, and our worship of Him consists in our proper moral behavior. For others it is our *feelings* that are supreme. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, put the emphasis on our feelings of dependence and of oneness with God. For him, to make Scripture authoritative was to elevate reason above faith, and that was unacceptable. Thus, one camp elevated *reason* and said that historical accounts (such as those in Scripture) cannot provide the certainty we require, while the other camp elevated *feeling* and rejected final confidence in Scripture as too much in keeping with reason. Both ways the Bible lost out.

The turn inward was accentuated by the philosophy of existentialism. This philosophy had an influence on Christian theology. Theologian Rudolph Bultmann was "the outstanding exponent of the amalgamation of theology and existentialism," according to Philip Edgecumbe Hughes. The Bible was stripped of the supernatural, leaving little at all to go by with respect to the person of Jesus. But this didn't matter since Bultmann's existentialism turned the focus inward on our individual experience of the encounter with God.

The influence of this shift is still felt today. For too many of us, our confidence rests in our *own* understanding of things with little regard for establishing a theological foundation by which to measure our experience. On the one hand we get confused by disagreements over doctrines, and on the other our society is telling us to find truth within ourselves. How often do we find Christians making their bottom line in any disagreement over Christian teaching or activity, "I just feel this is true (or right)"? Now, it's true we can focus so much on the propositional, doctrinal content of Christianity that it becomes lifeless. It does indeed engage us on the level of personal experience. But as one scholar notes, "What is at stake is the actual *truth* of the biblical witness; not in the

first place its truth *for me* . . . but its truth as coming *from God.* . . . The objective character of Scripture as truth given by God comes before and validates my subjective experience of its truth."{20} If we make our individual selves and our experiences normative for our faith, Christianity will have as many different faces as there are Christians! Our personal predilections and interests will become the substance of our faith. Any unity among us will be unity of *experience* rather than unity of the *faith.*

In response to the subjective turn of thinking, we hold that *reason* is insufficient as the source of knowledge of God. We could not know of such doctrines as the Incarnation and the Trinity unless God told us. Likewise, making *feelings* the final authority is death for theology, for there is no way to judge between personal experiences unless there is an objective authority. We have the needed authority in the revealed Word of God. Because we *can* know objective truth about God, we needn't look within ourselves to discover truth.

One final point. God has revealed Himself for a reason, that we might know Him and His desires and ways. We can have confidence that the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the writing of Scripture, has also been able to preserve it through the centuries so as to provide us with the same truth He provided those in ancient times.

God has spoken, through general revelation and special. We can know Him and His truth.

Notes

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3. Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 51.
4. Demarest, 242-243.

5. Warren Lewis, ed., *Global Congress of World Religions* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Unification Theological Seminary, 1978), 126.
6. Bolaji Idowe, *African Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1975), 151. Quoted in Demarest, 243.
7. Demarest, 243.
8. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Revelation, Special," by Carl F. H. Henry.
9. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 113.
10. J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 87.
11. Packer, 52-53.
12. Packer, 86.
13. Other modes of special revelation which can be categorized as the word spoken were dreams, visions, and theophanies. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 44-48.
14. Packer, 81.
15. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 287. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, Special Revelation and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 111.
16. Ramm, 113.
17. Philip E. Hughes, "The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity," in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 178.
18. See my article "Confident Belief: What Does It Mean To Know Truth?", Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Web at www.probe.org/confident-belief/.
19. See the above article.
20. Hughes, 183.

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One Minute After Death (radio transcript)

The Other Side of Life

Do you believe in life after death?{1}

Picture the operating room of a large hospital. A man is dying. As the doctors frantically try to save him, here is what he perceives and thinks:

> *"I am dying. I hear the doctor pronounce me dead. As I lie on the operating table, a loud, harsh buzzing reverberates in my head. At the same time, I sense myself moving very rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. Suddenly, I find myself outside of my own physical body. Like a spectator, I watch the doctor's desperate attempts to revive my corpse.*
>
> *"Soon I encounter a 'being' of light, a loving, warm spirit who shows me an instant replay of my life and helps me evaluate my past deeds.*
>
> *"Eventually, I learn I must return to my body. I resist, for my afterlife experience has been quite pleasant. Somehow, though, I am reunited with my physical body and live."{2}*

This composite account of a near-death experience or "NDE" is adapted from the best selling book, *Life After Life*, by Dr. Raymond Moody, who brought these experiences to wide public awareness. Often the episodes involve out-of-body experiences or "OBEs."

While writing a book on this subject, I interviewed people

with some fascinating stories. A Kansas woman developed complications after major surgery. She sensed herself rising out of her body, soaring through space, and hearing heavenly voices before returning to her body. An Arizona man in a coma for five months after a motorcycle accident said he saw his deceased father, who spoke to him.

Actress Sharon Stone has described her own close call with death. She was hospitalized with bleeding from an artery at her skull's base. "I feel that I did die," she relates. She tells of "a giant vortex of white light" and says "I kind of poof sort of took off… into this glorious bright…white light. I started to see and be met by some of my friends. people who were very dear to me. It was very, very fast, and suddenly I was back. I was in my body and I was in the room." Stone says the experience affected her "profoundly" and that she "will never be the same."{3}

What do these near-death experiences mean? How should we interpret them? This article offers a biblical perspective.

Interpreting Near-Death Experiences

What are some possible explanations for the NDEs? Hundreds of people claim that they have died and lived to tell about it. Are their near-death and out-of-body experiences genuine previews of the afterlife? Hallucinations caused by traumatic events? Or something else?

Some patients have been pronounced clinically dead and later are resuscitated. Others have had close calls with death, but were never really thought dead (such as survivors of automobile accidents). Still others did die permanently but described what they saw before they expired.

Determination of the point of death is a hotly debated issue. In the past, doctors relied merely on the ceasing of the heartbeat and respiration. More recently they have used the

EEG or brainwave test. Whatever one considers the point of death, most would agree that these folks have come much closer to it than the majority of people living today.

A number of possible explanations for the OBEs have been offered. Different ones may apply in different situations.

The physiological explanations suggest that a "physical" condition may have caused some of the out-of-body experiences. For instance, cerebral anoxia (a shortage of oxygen in the brain) occurs when the heart stops. The brain can survive for a short while (usually only a few minutes) without receiving oxygen from the blood. Anoxia can produce abnormal mental states.{4} Patients who recover from heart failure and report OBEs may be merely reporting details of an "altered state of consciousness," some say.{5}

Electronic brain stimulation can produce out-of-body sensations. Researchers at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland placed electrodes in the brain of a woman suffering from epilepsy. As they stimulated her brain's right angular gyrus, she reported sensing she was floating about six feet above her body.{6}

The pharmacological explanations say that drugs or anesthetics may induce some of the near-death experiences. Some primitive societies use drugs to induce OBEs in their religious ceremonies.{7} LSD and marijuana sometimes generate similar sensations.{8} Even many medically accepted drugs have produced mental states akin to those reported by the dying. Ketamine is an anesthetic that is administered intravenously{9} and produces hallucinatory reactions.{10}

Psychological and Spiritual Explanations

How should we interpret near-death experiences? What do they mean? So far this we have examined physiological and pharmacological explanations, that is, causes involving the

body or drugs. Consider two other categories: psychological and spiritual explanations. The psychological explanations suggest that the individual's mind may generate the unusual mental experience. Sigmund Freud, writing about the difficulty of coping with the thought of death, said it would be more comfortable in our minds to picture ourselves as detached observers.{11} Some modern psychiatrists theorize that the OBE is merely a defense mechanism against the anxiety of death. That is, since the thought of one's own death is so frightening, the patient's mind invents the OBE to make it seem as if only the body is dying while the soul or spirit lives on.

Other psychologists wonder if the patient may be confusing his or her *interpretation* of the experience with what actually happened.{12} The conscious mind needs an explanation for an unusual vision; therefore, it interprets the event in familiar terms. Thus, say these psychologists, resuscitated patients report conversations with deceased relatives or religious figures common to their culture.

The spiritual explanations view many of the OBEs as real manifestations of the spiritual.

Many have noted that earlier reports of NDEs seemed to contradict some traditional Christian beliefs about the afterlife. All of the patients Christian and non-Christian reported feelings of bliss and ecstasy with no mention of unpleasantness, hell, or judgment.

However, further research uncovered negative experiences. For instance, Raymond Moody wrote of one woman who was supposedly "dead" for 15 minutes and said she saw spirits who appeared "bewildered." "They seemed to shuffle," she reported, "as someone would on a chain gang not knowing where they were going. they all had the most woebegone expressions. It was quite depressing."{13}

Dr. Moody observed, “Nothing I have encountered precludes the possibility of a hell.”{14}

Some have felt that OBEs are inconsistent with the biblical concept of a final judgment at the world’s end. No one reports standing before God and being judged for eternity. Dr. Moody responds that “the end of the world has not yet taken place,” so there is no inconsistency. “There may well be a final judgment,” he says. “Near-death experiences in no way imply the contrary.”{15}

So, is there a life after death?

Is There Life After Death?

The spring of my sophomore year in college, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike’s death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends were asking questions like, “Is there a life after death?” and “How can we experience it?”

Is it possible to know whether there is an afterlife? What method would you use to find out?

Some suggest using the *experimental method* of science and applying it to the near-death experiences. However, these events normally are not controlled, clinical situations. They’re medical emergencies. Even if scientists could establish controls, we have no mind-reading machines to verify mental/spiritual experiences. And think about recruiting subjects. Would you volunteer to undergo clinical death for research purposes?

Some suggest relying on personal *experience* to answer the question. But the experiential method has its drawbacks, too. NDEs can provide useful information, but the mind can trick us. Dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, drug trips, drunkenness, states of shock all can evoke mental images that

seem real but aren't.

What if we could find a *spiritual authority*, someone with trustworthy credentials, to tell us the truth about afterlife issues?

Following Mike's death, I encouraged my friends to consider Jesus of Nazareth as a trustworthy spiritual authority. As somewhat of a skeptic myself, I'd found the resurrection of Christ to be one of the best-attested facts of history.{16} If Jesus died and came back from the dead, He could accurately tell us what death and the afterlife are like. The fact that He successfully predicted His own resurrection{17} helps us believe that He will tell us the truth about the afterlife.

Jesus and His early followers indicated that the afterlife would be personal, that human personalities would continue to exist.{18} Eternal life would be relational, involving warm, personal relationships with God and with each other.{19} Eternal life would be enjoyable, defying our description and exceeding our imagination. "No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him," wrote one early believer.{20} And eternal life would be eternal. It would never end. "God has given us eternal life," wrote one of Jesus' closest friends, "and this life is in His Son."{21}

The sad thing is that some people don't want to take advantage of eternal life.

How to Be Sure You'll Live Forever

Maurice Rawlings, M.D., a cardiologist, tells of a patient who had a cardiac arrest in Dr. Rawlings' office. During the attempted resuscitation, the patient screamed, "I am in hell!" "Don't stop!" he begged in terror. "Each time you quit I go back to hell!"{22}

The biblical hell, or Hades, is the current home of those who

do not accept God's forgiveness. The final abode of those who refuse forgiveness is called the "lake of fire."{23}

Not a pleasant subject. But remember, God loves you and wants you to spend eternity with Him.{24} He sent Jesus, His Son, to die and pay the penalty for our sins (attitudes and actions that fall short of God's perfection). We simply need to receive His free gift of forgiveness we can never earn it to be guaranteed eternal life. "Whoever hears my word," Jesus says, "and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."{25}

How should we interpret the near-death experiences? Here's my perspective as one who believes the evidence supports Jesus' and biblical reliability.{26} If a given NDE contradicts biblical statements or principles, I do not accept it as being completely from God. If the experience does not contradict biblical statements or principles, then it *could* be from God. (Body, drug or mind could also influence it.)

A given NDE could be completely spiritual and yet not be from God. Jesus spoke of an evil spiritual being, Satan. We are told that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light,"{27} but Jesus called him "a liar and the father of lies."{28} I'm not accusing all near-death experiencers of being in league with the devil. Just a friendly word of caution that some may be being deceived.

Once a nightclub near Cincinnati was packed to the brim. Suddenly, a busboy stepped onto the stage, interrupted the program and announced that the building was on fire. Perhaps because they saw no smoke, many of the guests remained seated. Maybe they thought it was a joke, a part of the program, and felt comfortable with that explanation. When they finally saw the smoke, it was too late. More than 150 people died as the nightclub burned.{29}

Are you believing what you want to believe, or what the

evidence shows is true? Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.”{30} I encourage you to place your faith in Jesus if you haven’t yet. Then you, too, will live, even if you die.

Notes

1. This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, “One Minute After Death,” *Pursuit* magazine, Vol. V, No. 2, 1996; Rusty Wright, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the End, *Collegiate Challenge,* Vol. 17, 1978, pp. 2-5; and Rusty Wright, *The Other Side of Life* (Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 1979, 1994).
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4. Stanislav Grof, M. D., and Joan Halifax-Grof, “Psychedelics and the Experience of Death,” in Toynbee, Koestler, and others, *Life After Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 196.
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8. Grof and Halifax Grof, op. cit., pp. 193-195; Stanislav Grof, “Varieties of Transpersonal Experiences: Observations from LSD Psychotherapy,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology,* 4:1, 1972, p. 67; Russell Noyes, Jr., M.D., and Roy Kletti, “Depersonalization in the Face of Life-Threatening Danger: An Interpretation,”

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12. Dr. Charles Tart in Robert A. Monroe, *Journeys Out of the Body* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 6,7.
13. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Reflections on Life After Life* (New York and Covington, Georgia: Bantam/Mockingbird, 1977), 19-21.
14. Ibid., 36.
15. Ibid., 36, 37.
16. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 1999.
17. See, for example, Jesus' resurrection predictions in Luke 9:22 and 18:31-33; their fulfillment in Luke 24.
18. See for example Luke 23:42-43; Matthew 8:11; 2 Samuel 12:23; Matthew 17:1-8.
19. John 14:2-3; Philippians 1:23; John 17:3.
20. 1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV. See also Revelation 21:4; Hebrews 12:2.
21. 1 John 5:11 NASB.
22. Maurice Rawlings, M.D., *Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 19-20.
23. Revelation 20:11-15.
24. John 3:16.
25. John 5:24 NIV.
26. See, for example, McDowell, op. cit.
27. 2 Corinthians 11:14 NASB.
28. John 8:44 NASB.
29. "They Didn't Believe It," *The New York Times,* May 30,

1977, p. 16; Hal Bruno, “The Fire Next Time,” *Newsweek,* June 13, 1977, pp. 24, 27.

30. John 11:25 NASB.

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The Council of Nicea and the Doctrine of the Trinity

Don Closson argues that Constantine did not impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church, demonstrating the actual role of church leaders and Constantine.

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 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.

Notes

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Evidence of Jesus' Existence?

Rusty Wright responds to the 2002 news about the ossuary (bone box) with the very intriguing and unusual inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

Rarely these days does Israel make headlines for something other than conflict. But a recent (Fall 2002) announcement about an ancient artifact there attracted wide attention.

Biblical Archaeology Review revealed that a stone ossuary (bone receptacle) has an inscription reading "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." If authentic, this would be the earliest archaeological find that corroborates biblical references to Jesus.

Andre Lemaire, a French expert on ancient writings from the Sorbonne, suspected the ossuary's significance when he saw it in the owner's private collection.

Time magazine claims that if the ossuary is authentic and the inscription refers to the biblical James, "this would be the most important discovery in the history of New Testament archaeology."

The New Testament in several places refers to James, Jesus' brother. In Matthew 13:53-55, citizens of Jesus' hometown Nazareth mention "His brother…James…." Paul, an early expositor of the faith, refers to "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19), a leader of Jerusalem's Christians.

Is the ossuary a first-century antiquity or a later forgery? The Geological Survey of Israel subjected it to rigorous tests. It is made of Jerusalem-area limestone quarried from the first or second century A.D. Its patina (sheen) bears evidence of centuries in a cave and shows no evidence of modern chemicals or disruption. Survey scientists conclude it's not a later forgery.

Paleography, the science of ancient writings, supports the early date. Johns Hopkins paleographer P. Kyle McCarter says the "script is consistent with a date in the middle of the first century A.D." Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, put James' death in 62 A.D.

Does the inscription refer to the biblical James, Joseph and Jesus? Lemaire's statistical analysis argues that in mid-first-century Jerusalem "there were probably about 20 people who could be called 'James son of Joseph brother of Jesus.'"

Only one other known ancient Jewish ossuary inscription mentions a brother. Was this Jesus, James' brother, mentioned because he was well known? Lemaire sees a 90 percent chance that the ossuary's James is the biblical brother of Jesus.

The case has critics. We know nothing of the ossuary's original location; evidence might have been compromised. At least one scholar disagrees with Lemaire's paleographic dating of the box. Some question his statistical basis for eliminating other possible Jameses in Jerusalem and feel that Lemaire overstates his case. But at least one feels he understates it.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam claim historical foundations.

Historical and archaeological confirmation – or contradiction – of their writings affects their credibility.

Christian faith does not stand or fall on the authenticity of this ossuary. But if genuine, the ossuary supports the conclusion of the late, renowned Jewish archaeologist Nelson Glueck, who asserted "the almost incredibly accurate historical memory of the Bible, and particularly so when it is fortified by archaeological fact."

Duke University Judaic Studies professor Eric Meyers, while advising caution on the James ossuary, feels "there is a strong possibility that the artifact is what Lemaire says it is: the oldest extra-biblical archaeological evidence of Jesus."

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Myths Christians Believe – False Beliefs Exposed

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

Angels, Good and Bad

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

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

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

An even greater myth that many people believe is the image of Satan as an ugly red creature with pitchfork, horns, and a tail who gladly reigns in hell. For this misconception we have several authors to thank, mainly the 13th century work of Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost,* written in the 1700s. The biblical image of Satan is of an angel who has fallen to irredeemable evil and depravity but yet can transform himself into a beautiful angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:14) He can make himself appear winsome, which is why people can be attracted to the occult. But Satan is not the king of hell. Jesus disarmed him at the Cross, made a public spectacle of him and the rest of the demons, and made him into a defeated foe destined for an eternity of torment in the lake of fire. (Col. 2:15, Rev. 20:10)

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

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

If I Do Everything Right, Life Will Work Smoothly.

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

So when life doesn’t go so smoothly, we often jump to one of two conclusions. Either we must be sinning, or God is out to get us. The book of Job draws back the curtain on the unseen drama in the heavenlies and shows us that when problems come, it doesn’t have to be one of these two options. Sometimes things are going on behind the scenes in the heavenly realm that have nothing to do with our sin. And since God is totally good, it’s a lie from the pit of hell that when bad things happen, God is out to get us in some kind of cosmic sadistic power play.

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

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

Third, we have an inaccurate view of suffering. We think that

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

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

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

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

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

One of my friends ministered as a chaplain at Ground Zero in New York after the Sept. 11 attacks. She got so tired and exhausted that she knew it was more than she could bear. That's when she discovered that her exhaustion took her out of

God's way and He could shine through her, ministering with His strength through her profound weakness.

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

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.

This myth has been repeated so many times that many people think its in Scripture. It's not. In fact, the truth is exactly the opposite. A heart full of self-dependence and self-reliance says to God, "I don't need You, I can do it myself. I can handle life without You." God honors our choices and the exercise of our will; He doesn't push His help on us. He waits for us to ask for it. He can't help those who help themselves because we're too busy *doing* to receive His strength and His help. It's like the way you can't fill a cup with coffee when it's already full of tea. Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5) But that doesn't stop lots of us from trying! The truth is, God doesn't help those who help themselves; God helps the helpless.

Two Myths About Heaven

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

God has one standard for getting into heaven: absolute perfection and holiness. The person who has sinned the smallest sin is still guilty and cannot be perfect and holy. It's like a balloon: once it's popped, there's nothing anyone can do to make it whole again. Only one Person has ever

qualified for heaven by being perfect and holy—the Lord Jesus. When we trust Christ as our Savior, He does two things for us: He pays the penalty for our sin, which keeps us out of hell, and He exchanges our sin for His righteousness, which allows us into heaven.

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

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

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

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

this.{3}

Myths About the Bible and Salvation

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

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

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

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

Many Christians believe another myth: "I believe in Jesus, but

surely God will let people of other faiths into heaven too." Many seem to think that being a "good Muslim" or a "sincere Buddhist" should count for something.

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

And Jesus, who ought to know because He is God in the flesh, said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) No other religion deals with the problem of sin and God's requirement of perfection and holiness on God's terms. There may be many ways to Jesus, but there's only way to the Father. It's God's heaven, and He makes the rules: it's Jesus or nothing.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr. Al Meredith, the pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, for this perspective. Wedgwood Baptist was the site of the massacre the night of the "See You At the Pole" celebration when seven youth and staff members were killed and seven others wounded by a crazed gunman.

2. Jeff Kinkade, pastor of Reinhardt Bible Church in Garland, Texas.

3. "Probe Answers Our E-Mail: Help Me Understand Rewards in Heaven."

4. "Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?". Also, "The Authority of the Bible" and "The Christian Canon".

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The Will of God

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

This article is also available in Spanish. 

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

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

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

Why do we worry so much about finding God's will? Could it be

we have a distorted idea of what it is or of how to find it?

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

What's going on? Does God have us on a great big scavenger hunt, poking about here and there, trying to find His elusive will before time runs out? Bruce Waltke likens this view to "a version of the old con man's ruse, the three-shell game,"{5} where a rock is put under one of three shells that are slid around the table in a confusing fashion to make you lose track of where it is. Is God playing games with us? Or is He telling us but we're hard of hearing?

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

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

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

The Will of God in Scripture

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

More often than not, the "will of God" in Scripture refers to God's moral laws or commands dealing with the stuff of everyday life. In the Old Testament we read, "Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law, And keep it with all my heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it" (Ps. 119: 34,35), and "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."(Ps. 40:8) In addition to these general laws, however, occasionally, prophets gave instructions regarding specific matters.

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

Does He have a specific plan for each of us? Surely He does, for how could He work the whole of history toward His desired end if the individual parts were left indefinite? Paul introduced himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." (Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1) The question is: Is God going

to tell us what to do in each specific situation? And, is it true that there's only one right choice?

Foundations of Decision Making

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

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

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

Third, there is a change in how people seek guidance from the era of the Old Covenant to that of the New. In Old Testament times, people used various ways of divining God's will, including casting lots, using the Urim and Thummim, and interpreting dreams. However, things changed after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke points out that "after Pentecost there is no instance of the church seeking God's will through any of the forms of divination" seen in the Old Testament. "The New Testament gives no explicit command to 'find God's will,' nor can you find any particular instructions on how to go about finding God's will."{10} He later adds, "God does not administer His church in the same

way He administered old Israel."{11} In Acts 1:24 we read of the apostles casting lots to know God's will about choosing another apostle to take Judas' place, but after this, "there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God's will" recorded.{12}

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

Fifth and last, the elements of decision making don't form some kind of neat, orderly system in which particular steps are taken in a necessary order, one following the other, so that when we reach the end the decision pops out.{14} Each element is weighed along with the others with some having more weight than others. For example, both my desires and the Bible are elements of decision making. But the Bible carries more weight. Sometimes one of the elements might incline us to say "no," but consideration of another, more weighty one will change that to a "yes." This is a part of wise thinking: understanding the weight of each factor using God's understanding as the standard.

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

Elements of Decision Making

The Bible

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

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

Because of the clarity of Scripture on many things, we have an immediate answer for a lot of the decisions we have to make. For example, a man doesn't need to ask if it's God's will for him to fool around with his neighbor's wife! The Bible is clear on that.

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

The desires of our heart

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

God gives us talents and abilities for a reason! If these things are honorable and useful for God's kingdom, they aren't

to be rejected simply out of fear that God might not like us to do something we enjoy! As one man put it, we can "love God and do what we please" when we walk close to Him, because we know Him and the kinds of things He desires.

Prayer and meditation

Walking closely with God can only happen through constant prayer. This is another significant element of decision making. Through prayer, we force ourselves to stay attuned to God. Our prayer is fed by a knowledge of and meditation upon His Word. Sometimes wise decisions become clear when distractions are put away and our minds are allowed to focus and do their work uninterrupted. We pray about particular issues, but we also pray for understanding in general. Paul prayed that the Colossians would learn God's will "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." (Col. 1:9) To all who ask believing, as James says, such wisdom will be given "generously and without reproach." (1:5)

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

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

Sometimes Christians say the Lord has "told" them to do

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

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

The church

Speaking of corporate wisdom, the counsel of others is an important element in making decisions. "Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory," we read in Proverbs 11:14. Such counsel is to be found primarily in the church, for it is the church that is

responsible to do the will of God on earth. Sometimes we can find good counsel on some matters from non-Christians. But when we're thinking of the major decisions of life we look to the church where we should be able to find those who share our Christian beliefs, who have the mind of Christ, and who are mature in godly wisdom. "Personal guidance," says Packer, "that we believe we have received by inner nudge from the Lord needs to be checked with believers who are capable of recognizing unrealism, delusion, and folly when they see it."{19}

Not only can we find guidance for dealing with ideas we have, but also the church is a channel for the Spirit calling us to do something new. Through the church, the Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. (Acts 13:2,3){20} In the fellowship of believers we have a place to discover the abilities we have and to put them to use, and to be drawn into places we never thought we could go.

Providence

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

Often, things seem to just happen in our lives by chance. More often than not it is in hindsight that we see the Lord at work. By "chance" you meet someone who turns out to be a valuable resource for some project you're working on. Without thinking anything about it you say something encouraging to someone who was that very day going to quit her job out of a

sense of hopelessness, and she reconsiders. Just a week or so ago a pastor told me about a certain speaker that he was going to have come to his church next year. I told him about some things that the man had written that he might not know about, which could prove the speaker a poor choice. After I told him, he said our conversation was providential. He researched the matter himself and agreed with me.

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

Because God's sovereign plan *will* be done, it isn't up to us to consciously bring it about. However, by being aware of how God is at work, we have clues about how to make decisions. We also grow in our faith as we see plans fall together that we have presented to Him, and we learn to relax in His control in our lives.

Wisdom

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

Wisdom is fundamentally a character trait. One writer notes that "the major thrust of wisdom in the Old Testament was a code of moral conduct . . . a way of thinking and conduct that is orderly, socially sensitive, and morally upright."{23} This theme is continued in the New Testament, for example, in Paul's prayer that we gain "spiritual wisdom and understanding," so we "may live a life worthy of the Lord and

may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work." (Col. 1:9,10) We might define wisdom as "a right ordering of life in keeping with the nature and will of God."

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

Faith

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

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

Summary

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

that confidence.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, “Guidance: How God Leads Us” in *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale Publishers, 1987), 105.
2. Packer, 106.
3. Friesen rejects this view. See his *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980).
4. Packer, 110, 116.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 7. “Most ancient texts still extant [nearly 80%] deal with divining the mind of God,” 26.
7. Waltke, 71.
8. As an aid to this, Waltke suggest we talk about the guidance of God rather than the will of God when making decisions. Cf. Waltke, 169.
9. Cf. Friesen, 179.
10. Waltke, 12.
11. Waltke, 54-55.
12. Waltke, 53. The word translated “show us” isn’t used again in the New Testament after Pentecost. It is only used elsewhere in Luke 10:1 referring to when Jesus appointed or “showed” the seventy disciples whom He sent out.
13. Waltke, 16.
14. Waltke believes there is an important order to the steps (see Waltke, p. 59), but I disagree. I do see a certain order of priority with respect to the weight of particular elements, however.
15. Waltke, 86.
16. Packer, 128.
17. Waltke, 19.
18. Packer, 129.
19. Packer, 122.
20. Cf. Waltke, 109.
21. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the*

Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), s.v. “Providence,” by Walter Elwell.
22. Rick Wade, “Miracles.” Probe Ministries, 2001. Available on the Internet at www.probe.org/miracles/.
23. Elwell, s.v. “Wisdom,” by C. Hassell Bullock.

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Eastern Orthodoxy

Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

In a previous article I spoke of the conversation now going on between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics prompted by the culture war. A third tradition is participating in such talks as well, namely, the Eastern Orthodox Church. For many if not most of us, Eastern Orthodoxy is a real mystery. Images of bearded priests and candles, and the sounds of chanting come to mind. They are so far removed from us, it seems. Are we really part of the same church? Such a question would be absolutely preposterous to them, of course, for Orthodox are fond of pointing out that they stand closer to the ancient church than do Catholics or Protestants.

In this article I’d like to introduce you to the Eastern Orthodox Church. I will simply present some of Orthodoxy’s history and beliefs as an introduction without offering any critique.{1}

History

Orthodox Christians trace their lineage back to the apostolic church. The apostles, of course, founded only one church.

Since the founding of the church there have been three significant divisions. The first occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries when what are known as the Oriental Orthodox churches split off over theological issues. These include the churches in Iran and Iraq, sometimes called the "Nestorian" or "Chaldean" churches. Also included were the Syrian Church of Antioch and the Coptic Church of Egypt. The churches that were left comprise what we know of as the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are the churches that remain in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.{2}

The next division, typically dated in the eleventh century, was between the Eastern Church and the Western or Roman Catholic Church. Rome was one of the five main centers, or *sees*, of the Church. Although it was the most important of the five, it was different from the others. For example, the Western Church based in Rome used Latin, whereas the Eastern Church used the languages of the people. Rome had more of a legal mindset in its theology, whereas the East was more mystical. In addition, various cultural and political issues set it apart. The barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in the West further separated the West from the East.

Such things as these set the stage for division. Two major issues brought it to a head. One was the power of the pope in Rome. The bishops of the Church had long been seen as generally equal; all the bishops had a vote in decisions affecting the whole Church. However, a few wielded more influence than others. The Roman See was at the top. Thus, the pope was considered the first among equals among the bishops of the Orthodox world. However, some of the popes came to desire universal supremacy. For example, Pope Nicholas wrote in 865 that he had authority "over all the earth, that is, over *every* Church."{3}

The other theological problem was that of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father. Does He proceed from the Father

only or both the Father and the Son? The Nicene Creed originally said that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father." A clause was added later by the Church in the West, without the agreement of the other bishops, to make it read, "proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*." Later I'll look at this a little more closely. For now we should note the importance of the clause for the unity of the Church.

The clause seems to have originated in Spain and was accepted by Charlemagne as part of the Creed. The seriousness of the matter can be seen in the antagonism it produced between East and West. For example, when the Greeks wouldn't include the phrase, writers in Charlemagne's court began accusing them of heresy. For another, in 867, Pope Nicholas' backing of the inclusion of the *Filioque* clause in opposition to the rest of the Church brought about his excommunication by Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, although communion was later restored.

The East resented its inclusion for two reasons. First, this act revealed the extent of power the Pope was trying to claim in allowing the addition on his own authority. Second, it was thought to be incorrect theologically. (I will return to these later.)

In the eleventh century relations between the East and the West worsened severely. Rome gained new power politically in the West, reviving the belief that it had universal jurisdiction. The Normans gained power in Italy and forced the Greeks there to conform to Latin methods of worship. In retaliation, the patriarch of Constantinople forced the Latin churches there to adopt Greek practices. After a few more events further heightened tensions, on July 16, 1054 some legates of the pope laid a Bull of Excommunication on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. This is the date commonly given for the great schism between the East and the West. It was a landmark occasion, but the end didn't finally come in fact until the early thirteenth century

following a few tragic events in the Crusades. Now there was the Roman Church and the Eastern Church, the one headed by the pope, the other headed by the patriarch of Constantinople.

The Godhead

Space does not permit a full description of the theology of the Orthodox Church. Let's touch briefly on its doctrine of God.

The Trinity

The Holy Trinity is of supreme importance in Orthodox theology and life. It "is not a piece of 'high theology' reserved for the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian." Because we're made in the image of God, we can't understand ourselves if we don't understand this doctrine. God's triune nature also makes clear that He is personal—that He experiences personal communion within the Godhead, and thus can commune with us as well.

The Father

Below I'll speak further about the role of the Father in the Trinity. Here I'll just touch on the Orthodox understanding of the knowability of God. Orthodox believe that God is unknowable to us in His essence for He is so much higher than we are: He is absolutely transcendent. For that reason we can only employ negative language when speaking of Him: we can say what He is *not* in His being, but not what He *is.*

However, God is not cut off from His creation. While God's *essence* is the core of His being and cannot be known, His *energies*, which permeate creation, enable us to experience Him. His energies "are God Himself in His action and

revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind."{4}

The Incarnate Son

The whole of the sacramental theology of Orthodoxy is grounded in the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation is so significant that Orthodox believe it would have occurred even if Adam and Eve hadn't fallen into sin. It was an act of love—God sending His Son to commune with us. Because of sin, however, it also became an act of salvation.

Orthodoxy seeks to give proper weight to both Christ's deity and His humanity. One must recall the weight given to the Nicene Creed and its clear declaration of both natures. He is "true God and true man, one person in two natures, without separation and without confusion: a single person, but endowed with two wills and two energies." The divinity of Christ is of utmost importance to Orthodox. "'Behind the veil of Christ's flesh, Christians behold the Triune God' . . . perhaps the most striking feature in the Orthodox approach to the Incarnate Christ [is] an overwhelming sense of His *divine glory.*"{5} He is the face of God for us. This revelation was seen most strikingly in the Transfiguration and the Resurrection.{6} On the other hand, the places where He lived and ministered and the Cross upon which He died are pointers to His humanity, and they are revered highly.

The Holy Spirit

The importance of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church can hardly be overstated. They believe, in fact, that it is one thing that sets the Eastern Church apart from the Western. Whereas the Western Church put greater emphasis on the power of theological understanding, Orthodox depend more on the

activity of the Spirit. St. Seraphim of Sarov said that such things as prayer and fasting and other Christian practices are not the aim of the Christian life. “The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.”{7} In the corporate setting, the Spirit is invoked repeatedly in Church worship. On the individual level, believers place themselves under His protection each morning in their prayers.

Earlier I talked about the split in the Church in the eleventh century. One of the key issues was the clause the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed, which said that the Spirit was sent by the Father *and by the Son*. This was called the *Filioque* clause. The Eastern Church rejected this addition because it was inserted without the support of the universal Church and because it was seen as incorrect theologically. For Orthodox theologians, the clause confused the roles of the Father and the Son in the economy of the Trinity. “The distinctive characteristic of the first person of the Trinity is Fatherhood,” says Timothy Ware. “He is the source in the Trinity. The distinctive character of the second person is Sonship; . . . [He] has His source and origin in the Father, . . . The distinctive character of the third person is Procession: like the Son, He has His source and origin in the Father; but His relationship to the Father is different from that of the Son, since He is not begotten but from all eternity He *proceeds* from the Father.”{8} To the Orthodox, then, to say the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the *Son* is to give those two persons the same function. They point out, too, the scriptural teaching that “the Spirit of truth . . . proceeds from the Father.” (Jn. 15:26)

Furthermore, the clause seemed to imply a subordination of the Spirit to the Son, which could result in a diminution of the Spirit in the Church. But the ministry of the Spirit and the Son are “complementary and reciprocal.” “From one point of view,” says Ware, “the whole ‘aim’ of the Incarnation is the

sending of the Spirit at Pentecost."{9}

The Church in Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that true belief and worship are maintained by the Orthodox Church. "Orthodoxy claims to be universal—not something exotic and oriental, but simply Christianity," says Orthodox bishop Timothy Ware.{10} They believe that Orthodoxy has maintained the teachings of the apostles and the early Church faithfully through the centuries.

Three Defining Characteristics

Something one notices soon after beginning an investigation of the Orthodox Church is its attempt to let its theology inform its practice in life and in worship.

The Orthodox Church can be described generally under three headings: Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological. Regarding the *Trinity*, beyond simply holding it as a correct understanding of God, the Church attempts to emulate the Trinity in its practices. As the Trinity is both one and many, the Church is thought of as both one and many—unity in diversity. This applies to both individuals and to local churches all taken together. Orthodoxy is made up of a number of independent *autocephalous* churches, as they are called. "Just as in the Trinity the three persons are equal," says Ware, "so in the Church no one bishop can claim to wield absolute power over all the rest; yet, just as in the Trinity the Father enjoys pre-eminence as source and fountainhead of the deity, so within the Church the Pope is 'first among equals'."{11}

Further, the Orthodox Church is *Christological.* It sees itself as "the extension of the Incarnation, the place where the Incarnation perpetuates itself." It is "the centre and organ

of Christ's redeeming work . . . it is nothing else than the continuation and extension of His prophetic, priestly, and kingly power . . . The Church is Christ with us."{12}

Finally, the Church is *Pneumatological*. It is the dwelling place of the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of power in the Church. In addition, He both unites the Church and ensures our diversity. We are separately given the Spirit, but so that we might come together. "Life in the Church does not mean the ironing out of human variety, nor the imposition of a rigid and uniform pattern upon all alike, but the exact opposite. The saints, so far from displaying a drab monotony, have developed the most vivid and distinctive personalities."{13}

Authority in the Church

The Orthodox Church is at once popular and hierarchical. It is popular in the sense that the focus is on the people, and authority resides in the Church, which is the people of God. However, the Church is represented in its leadership, and here one finds a strong hierarchy. Major decisions are made by the bishops with a special place of honor going to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. "Where Rome thinks in terms of the supremacy and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope," says Ware, "Orthodoxy thinks in terms of the five Patriarchs and of the Ecumenical Councils."{14}

While the decisions of bishops are binding in general, it is understood that they aren't infallible. The Church is infallible, but its bishops aren't. As Paul said, the *church* is "the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15)

For the Orthodox, the Church is the bearer and guardian of truth, which is passed on through *Tradition*. Included in Church Tradition are the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the early centuries, and the writings of the Fathers, the Canons or laws, the Icons—"in fact," says Timothy Ware, "the whole

system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages."{15} The Bible forms a *part* of this Tradition; it is seen as a product *of* the Church and derives its authority *from* the Church. "Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils."{16} As another writer says, "It is neither subordinate nor superior to tradition, not can there be any contradictions between them."{17}

When challenges were made to what had been taught by the Church from the beginning, answers were provided by various councils through the early centuries. The most important was the Council of Nicaea. Thus the Nicene Creed has preeminence, although the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creeds are also used. At these councils important doctrines of the faith were hammered out. Nicaea, for example, dealt with the person of Christ. Was He God or man or both? If both, how did the two natures relate in one person? The determinations of the councils, which were universally accepted, became authoritative for the Church.

The Church Fathers also provided authoritative teaching about Christian doctrine. Sometimes, however, they were in error. It became necessary, then, for the church to distinguish "patristic wheat . . . from patristic chaff."{18}

The Worship of the Church

A close look at the Orthodox Church reveals quickly the importance of the Church as a whole, as the functioning body of Christ. The priority of the Church in Orthodoxy—not the so-called "invisible" or universal Church, but the visible worshipping community—might seem a bit odd to evangelicals. In evangelicalism the emphasis is more upon the individual's

relationship to Christ, whereas in Orthodoxy, the Christian life revolves around the Church as the locus of the ministry of Christ and the Spirit.

The Church is thought of as a reflection of heaven on earth. This belief underlies the elaborate nature of the worship experience. This reflection is seen first of all through *beauty*. A peculiar gift of the Orthodox, it is said, "is this power of perceiving the beauty of the spiritual world, and expressing that celestial beauty in their worship."{19}

The worship service has supreme importance in Orthodoxy; it is more important than doctrine and the disciplines of the Christian life. "Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfillment in worship." The liturgy is the contents of the worship service including the readings, actions, music, and all else involved. Says Timothy Ware: "Into the Holy Liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience." It is what inspires "their best poetry, art, and music."{20} Further, the liturgy of worship attempts to embrace both worlds—heaven and earth. There is "one altar, one sacrifice, one presence" in both. It is in the Church that God dwells among humans.

Orthodoxy is thoroughly sacramental. Holding that God has graced the physical world through the Incarnation of Christ, Orthodox see the whole of the created order as somehow graced by God and usable for revealing Himself. For the life of the Church there are special sacraments that are channels of God's grace. Through particular physical means, such as through the elements of Communion or the water of Baptism, God extends His grace in a special way. The sacraments are "effectual signs of grace, ritual acts which both express and bring about a spiritual reality. Just as in the Incarnation the eternal Word of God was united with human nature in Jesus Christ, so in the sacraments spiritual gifts are communicated through tangible

realities."{21}

The Liturgy of worship reaches its highest point in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church; it is "a Eucharistic society, which only realizes its true nature when it celebrates the Supper of the Lord, receiving His Body and Blood in the sacrament."{22} "It is no coincidence," says Ware, "that the term 'Body of Christ' should mean both the Church and the sacrament." Where the Eucharist is, the Church is.{23}

There are other sacraments, too, in Orthodoxy, such as baptism, Chrismation (their equivalent roughly of Confirmation), Confession, and marriage. Customarily seven sacraments are listed, although there is no final word on the number. They aren't all equal in importance; some are more significant than others, Baptism and the Eucharist being the most important. But all serve to convey the grace of Christ to His Church.

The Orthodox concept of the Church is extremely rich. There are aspects of their worship that many Evangelicals would find odd or uncomfortable (such as standing throughout the service) or even objectionable. But the attempt to bring the fullness of the kingdom into the worship service creates a rich and meaningful experience for the participants. Orthodoxy is unabashedly mystical. The worship service works to bring believers closer to a kind of mystical union with God. Here, the believer is to experience the presence of God and through it to eventually partake of the nature of God.

Icons and Deification

Let's look at two beliefs of the Orthodox Church that are quite unusual to evangelicals.

I've already noted the importance of the Incarnation for the sacramental view of Christianity and of the world. It is also

important for understanding the Orthodox use of icons. An icon, Timothy Ware tells us, "is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world."{24} The use of icons reveals their view of matter, the created order. "God took a material body," says Ware, "thereby proving that matter can be redeemed. . . . God has 'deified' matter, making it 'spirit- bearing'; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then– though in a different way–can wood and paint. The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified."{25} Ware says that Nicolas Zernov's comments about the Russian Orthodox view of icons is true for Orthodoxy in general:

> *They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The colours and lines of the [icons] were not meant to imitate nature; the artists aimed at demonstrating that men, animals, and plants, and the whole cosmos, could be rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper 'Image.' The [icons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. . . . The artistic perfection of an icon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory–it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The icons were part of the transfigured world.{26}*

Orthodox don't worship icons, but rather venerate or reverence them. They are intended to remind the believer of God. Even those without theological training can learn from icons. But icons are more than a convenient teaching tool for Orthodox; they are thought to "safeguard a full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation." The Iconoclasts, it is thought (those who in the Orthodox Church fought *against* the use of icons), fell

into a kind of dualism between defiled matter and the spiritual realm. “Regarding matter as a defilement, they wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ’s humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must by saved and transfigured.”{27}

Deification

One of the oddest teachings of Orthodoxy to evangelicals is that of the *deification* of man or *theosis*. The central message of Christianity is the message of redemption in Christ. Orthodox take quite literally the apostle Paul’s teachings on *sharing* in the message of redemption. “Christ shared our poverty that we might share the riches of His divinity; ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich, (2 Corinthians viii, 9). . . . The Greek Fathers took these and similar texts in their literal sense, and dared to speak of humanity’s ‘deification’ (in Greek, *theosis*).” We are “called to become by grace what God is by nature.” For this to happen, of course, Christ had to be fully man as well as fully God. “A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the Incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once.”{28} Thus, “For Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification.”{29}

Underlying the idea of deification or divinization is the fact of our being made in “the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity. . . . Just as the three persons of the Trinity ‘dwell’ in one another in an unceasing movement of love, so we humans, made in the image of the Trinity, are called to ‘dwell’ in the Trinitarian God. Christ prays that we may share in the life of the Trinity, in the movement of love which

passes between the divine persons; He prays that we may be taken up into the Godhead."{30} Jesus prayed "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (Jn. 17:21) As Peter wrote: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Pet 1:4)

As the *image* of God, we are icons of God. There is a reflection of God in us by nature. However, we *grow* in the *likeness* of God, or "the assimilation to God through virtue." If we make proper use of our ability to have communion with God, "then we will become 'like' God, we will acquire the divine likeness. . . . To acquire the likeness is to be deified, it is to become a 'second god', a 'god by grace'." This is a goal we only acquire by degrees. "However sinful we may be, we never lose the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our 'virtue', and so it is destroyed by sin."{31}

But will we be fully like God ourselves? To understand this doctrine, we must understand the difference between God's essence and His energies. God's essence is the core of His being. His energies are those characteristics by which we experience Him. "They are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind." We cannot know His essence, but we can know His energies. Our deification consists in our "union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism." We do not become one being with God. Nor do we become separate gods in our very essence. "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation." We are thus created gods.{32}

This deification involves the body, too. We will be transformed as Christ was in the Transfiguration, but the full

transformation of our bodies will not come until the Last Day.

Several points can be made about the significance of deification. First, it is meant for all believers, not just a few. Second, the process doesn't mean we won't be conscious of sin in our lives. There is a continual repentance in the Christian life. Third, the means of attaining deification aren't extraordinary. They are simple: "go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments."{33} Fourth, it is a social process. The second most important commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't become divinized by ourselves. We realize the divine likeness as we live a common life with other believers such as that of the Trinity. "As the three persons of the Godhead 'dwell' in one another, so we must 'dwell' in our fellow humans."{34} Fifth, deification is very practical. It involves the hands on application of Christian love, such as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc. Sixth, it "presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments," for it is here that we commune with God. "Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby we may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness."{35}

Evangelicals who are used to emphasizing a rational understanding of doctrine grounded in Scripture might find all this too vague. How can we hold to a doctrine of deification without falling into polytheism or pantheism? Once again we must take note of Orthodox mystical theology. Significant doctrines aren't always clearly parsed and laid out for understanding. Orthodox have a very "face value" kind of theology: if Scripture says we are gods, then we are gods.

Concluding Remarks

This look at the Eastern Orthodox Church has been necessarily brief and rather surface. I have attempted to provide a simple introduction without adding an Evangelical critique. It is my

hope that listeners will seek to learn more about Orthodoxy, both for a better understanding of the history of the Christian church, and to prompt reflection on a different way of thinking about our faith. While we might have serious questions about certain doctrines and practices of Orthodoxy, we can't help but be enriched by others. The centrality of corporate worship as contrasted with our primary focus on the individual; the importance of beauty grounded in Christian beliefs contrasted with either the austerity of Protestant worship in the past or our present focus on personal tastes in aesthetics; the way fundamental doctrines such as that of the Trinity and the Incarnation weave their way throughout Christian belief and life in contrast to our more pragmatic way of thinking and living; these things and more make a study of the Orthodox Church an enriching experience. Even if one is simply challenged to rethink one's *own* beliefs, the effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, in the context of the current culture wars it can only help to get to know others in our society who claim Jesus as Lord and seek to live according to the will of the one true God.

Notes

1. The writer has attempted to represent Eastern Orthodoxy by remaining true to its stylistic preferences, such as capitalizing references to the universal church and the particular sacraments (Baptism, Communion, etc.).

2. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

3. Ware, 53.

4. Ware, 232.

5. Ware, 225. Quotation from Bishop Theophan the Recluse.

6. "In Orthodox worship and spirituality tremendous emphasis

in placed on both these events." Ware, 226. "The theme of the Resurrection of Christ binds together all theological concepts and realities in eastern Christianity and unites them in a harmonious whole." O. Rousseau, "Incarnation et anthropologie en orient et en occident," in Irnikon, vol. xxvi (1953), p. 373, quoted in Ware, 226.

7. Ware, 229-30.

8. Ware, 211.

9. Ware, 229-30.

10. Ware, 8.

11. Ware, 240.

12. Ware, 241.

13. Ware, 242-243.

14. Ware, 239.

15. Ware, 196.

16. Ware, 197.

17. Keith Crim, ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of Religions*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), s.v. "Orthodox Churches" by V. Kesich.

18. Ware, 204.

19. Ware, 265.

20. Ware, 266.

21. Keith Crim, ed. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), s.v. "Sacraments," by T.J. Talley.

22. Ware, 13.

23. Ware, 242.

24. Ware, 206.

25. Ware, 33-34.

26. Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (London, 1945), 107-08, quoted in Ware, 34.

27. Ware, 33.

28. Ware, 20-21.

29. Ware, 231.

30. Ware, 231.

31. Ware, 219.

32. Ware, 232.

33. Ware, 236.

34. Ware, 237.

35. Ware, 237-38.

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That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade

introduces the conversation.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I son realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural

circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission,* Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. "In front of abortion clinics," says Colson, "Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies." This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

> Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.{4}

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the "new ecumenism," a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus' Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.{5}

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.{6} Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it is very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.{7} At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In 1966 at theWorld Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. "Thereafter the ideological radicals increased," says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn "toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics."{8} It tried to form alliances around the "edges" of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church's role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won't last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity's critic. Oden says that, "We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined."{9}

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of

picking and choosing one's truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they're really *true.* This isn't the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.{10}

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to

the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early ’90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.”{11} In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

> As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: “May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,{12} Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled “The Gift of Salvation,” which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,{13} the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn’t find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working

something *in* us which becomes part of our justification(the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?{14}

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.{15} Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was "to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age."{16} An important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: "The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united."{17}

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don't. The first is the culture war. Some are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural

importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."{18} There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.
- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the endless joy of heaven."{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

> How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with it maintenance of the authority of Scripture and with it acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that

has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority. Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.{22} If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now.

That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even *be* Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."{23} Having read some Catholic expositions of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I'm reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren't Christians at all. Again, this isn't to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one's understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don't know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, "Well, he's Catholic so he can't be saved."

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the

day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled "Ecumenical Jihad," in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.{24}

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is on Jesus' prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren't acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity "is a 'costly act' involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches."{25} Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families."{26} The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don't with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

> Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to

> accept the valuable help of their elucidation?{27}

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the "Decree on Ecumenism." Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. "The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals." He says:

> It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}
>
> Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues

to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.

- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.
- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ."{31} It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous?)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent,* sess. 7, canon 8)."{32} *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent,* sess. 6, chap. 7).{33} Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise."{34}

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles' Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we're talking about different religions altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be "brothers and sisters in Christ"?{35}

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed "An Appeal to

Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: "The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake." This doesn't preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.{36}

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: “However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable.”{37} A simple recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus’ prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural crisis “is a recultivation of conscience.”{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? “At root, every issue that divides the American people,” Colson says, “is religious in essence.”{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn’t a unity of convenience, but a

unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.
2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective, " in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.
7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the

conference “Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain,” Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.
8. Tom Oden, “The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society,” Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” First Things 43 (May 1994) 15-22.
12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in “Why I Signed It,” *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.
13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, “Getting Justification Right,” *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.
15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.
16. James S. Cutsinger, “Introduction: Finding the Center, in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.
17. Neuhaus, “A New Thing,” 57.
18. Oden, “The New Ecumenism.”
19. J.I. Packer, “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology,” in Cutsinger, 156.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.
21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I’ll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to

the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.
22. Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 251.
23. Packer, “On from Orr,” 174.
24. Peter Kreeft, “Ecumenical Jihad,” Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.
25. Avery Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism and the Future (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.
28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” 137-38.
29. Dulles, “Unity,” 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I’ve included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics,* xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone,* 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of “substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . .” and to “the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone.” See “Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT,” available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic

and Evangelical Dialogue," drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.html.
36. "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue." See also "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not "kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism." He believes that "Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul, it must not be deemed insurmountable." See his comments in "Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response," in *Christianity Today,* Oct. 7, 1996.
38. Packer, "On from Orr," 157.
39. Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 13.
40. Ibid., 14.

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