Did Moses Write the Pentateuch?

Introduction

Most Christians have been taught in Sunday school that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. These books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are often referred to as the Pentateuch or Torah. However, outside of the more conservative seminaries and churches, it is commonly held that Moses did not write these books, that they are a compilation of works by numerous writers over an extended period of time.

Religious studies courses at most universities teach that the Pentateuch is a composite work consisting of four literary strands. The four strands have been assigned the letters J, E, D, and P; each representing a different document or source that was woven into the fabric of the Bible. This set of assumptions has gone by a number of names including the documentary theory and the Graf-Wellhausen theory. According to this view, the letter "J" stands for the *Yahwist* ("J" from the German Jahweh) *narrative*, coming from the period of the early Jewish monarchy, about 950 B.C. "E" stands for the *Elohist narrative* from the region of the Northern Kingdom dating from about 750 B.C. "D" is best represented by the book of Deuteronomy and is said to have originated in the Southern Kingdom about 650 B.C. or later. And finally, "P" is the priestly document that comes from the period after the fall of Israel in 587 B.C. According to the theory, the Pentateuch reached its current form around the time of Ezra or about 400 B.C.

Why is the issue of Mosaic authority an important one? Those who accept the documentary or Graf-Wellhausen theory argue

that the content of these books should be seen as a mixture of credible historical events and religious poetry sparked by man's religious imagination. For example, regarding Moses and God on Mount Sinai, one author of an Old Testament survey writes that, "It would be foolish, for instance, to rationalize the burning bush, as though this vision were something that could have been seen with the objective eye of a camera."{1} Holders of this view reject the notion of supernatural revelation and regard much of the Pentateuch as folklore and Hebrew storytelling.

On the other hand, the conservative view holds to Mosaic authorship and treats the books as a literary unit. This does not mean that Moses didn't use other documents to write his books. He obviously did. But since other Old Testament authors affirm Mosaic authorship, as do numerous New Testament writers and the early church fathers, the veracity of the Bible as a whole begins to crumble if Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch.

In this article we will take a closer look at the source of the documentary theory regarding Mosaic authorship and offer a response that argues for the integrity of the Bible.

Origins Of The Documentary Hypothesis

For almost two thousand years Christians accepted Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. That's not to say that some didn't acknowledge problems with the text. Many had noted what seemed to be two separate creation stories in Genesis, as well as the problem of Moses recording his own death in Deuteronomy 34.

In 1753, a French physician named Jean Astruc began the modern study of source or literary analysis by writing a commentary on the book of Genesis.{2} He noted that the first chapter of Genesis refers to God as Elohim, while the second chapter uses mostly Jehovah or Yahweh. Astruc believed that Moses must have

used two different sources in writing Genesis, each having different names for God, and that the Elohim source was the older. This established the first principle of what would become known as the documentary hypothesis, the assumption that different divine names must mean different authors or sources. In 1780 Johann Eichhorn took this theory and ran with it. He applied the idea of two sources to the rest of Genesis, Exodus, and finally to most of the Pentateuch. He eventually gave up on the view of Mosaic authorship as well.

The next step came in 1805, when Wilhem De Wette argued that none of the Pentateuch was written before David. He established the "D" document standing for Deuteronomy, which he believed was written as propaganda to support political and religious unification in Jerusalem during the reign of king Josiah around 621 B.C. We now have three source documents: J, E, and D. Although others in the late 1700's and early 1800's found as many as thirty-nine fragments in Genesis alone, the final, "P" or Priestly document of the current theory was added by Hermann Hupfeld in 1853. He believed that the E source should be split in two, the later becoming the new P document.

The name most associated with the documentary hypothesis is Julius Wellhausen. His publications in the late 1870's didn't add much new information to the theory, but rather argued for it from a Darwinistic perspective. Wellhausen claimed that the J, E, D, P sequence followed the development from primitive animism towards the more sophisticated monotheism that would be expected as the Jewish culture and religion evolved. The impact of this connection was immediate and powerful.

Even though both liberal and conservative scholars removed much of the foundation of the documentary hypothesis in the twentieth century, the idea remains entrenched. As Gleason Archer states, "For want of a better theory . . . most non-conservative institutions continue to teach the Wellhausian theory, at least in its general outlines, as if nothing had

happened in Old Testament scholarship since the year 1880."{3}

Problems With The Documentary Hypothesis

Let's now look at the problems with this theory.

First, it should be mentioned that conservative experts did not sit idly by as this theory developed and spread. In the late 1800's Princeton Seminary scholars Joseph Alexander and William Green "subjected the documentarian school to devastating criticism which has never been successfully rebutted by those of liberal persuasion," according to Gleason Archer.{4} In Germany, Ernst Wilhem Hengstenberg ably defended the Mosaic authorship of all five books of the Pentateuch. His 1847 book *The Genuineness of the Pentateuch* did much to encourage conservative thinking.

It should also be noted that the Wellhausen theory found what it was looking for. The theory grew out of a movement to find rationalistic, natural explanations for the biblical text. Once one assumes that supernatural revelation cannot occur any other explanation must take precedent. The late dates and various authors assigned to the books allow for purely naturalistic sources. This is a textbook case of question begging. The underlying premise, that there can be no such thing as supernatural revelation, resulted in the conclusion that the Bible is not a supernaturally revealed document.{5}

Another problem with the theory is that it assumes that "Hebrew authors differ from any other writers known in the history of literature in that they alone were incapable of using more than one name for God," or for that matter, more than one style of writing.{6} It is interesting that the Qur'an (Koran) uses multiple names for God, but few question that Muhammad was its sole author. Regarding the various writing styles, it would be like arguing that C. S. Lewis could not possibly have written children's stories, literary critiques, science fiction, and allegorical satire; and

insisting that numerous sources must have been involved. Educated as an Egyptian prince, Moses would have been exposed to many writing styles that were available during that period.

Another bias is evident in how critics regard the biblical data as unreliable and suspect, despite its old age even by their own dating methods. The tendency is to disregard the biblical content immediately when a non-biblical source disagrees with it, even when the biblical document is older. In the words of one conservative Old Testament scholar:

> *It makes no difference how many biblical notices, rejected as unhistorical by nineteenth-century pundits, have been confirmed by later archaeological evidence (such as the historicity of Belshazzar, the Hittites, and the Horites), the same attitude of skeptical prejudice toward the Bible has persisted, without any justification.{7}*

In the next section we will continue to offer arguments against the documentary hypothesis and for the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible.

A Conservative Approach

Despite what Gleason Archer calls “The overwhelming contrary evidence from Genesis to Malachi,” advocates of the Wellhausen theory cling to its most fundamental principle: that the religion of the Jews evolved from primitive animism to a more sophisticated monotheism.{8}

But their unsupported assumptions don’t stop there. Modern scholars assume that Hebrew writers never used the repetition of ideas or occurrences even though authors in other ancient Semitic languages did so. They also assume that they can scientifically date the texts, even though they have no other ancient Hebrew writings to compare them with. Documentary scholars have felt free to amend the text by substituting more common words for rare or unusual words that they do not

understand or do not expect to see in a given context.{9} Although it claims to be scientific, the documentary hypothesis is anything but neutral.

What are the arguments for Mosaic authorship? First, there are numerous passages in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that point to Moses as author. For instance, Exodus 34:27 says, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'" In fact, there are references throughout the Old Testament (Joshua, 1 & 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Malachi) that claim that Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

New Testament writers assumed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible as well. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus refers to laws regarding marriage in Deuteronomy and credits Moses with writing them. In John 5:46 Jesus says, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." (See 7:19 also.) In Romans 10:5 Paul states that Moses wrote the law. It would be hard not to attribute either deception or error to Christ and the apostles if Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

There are many other internal evidences that point to Mosaic authorship. The writer of Exodus gives eyewitness details of the event that only a participant would know about. The author of Genesis and Exodus also portrays remarkable knowledge of Egyptian names and places. This knowledge is evident even in the style of writing used. One scholar has noted that the writer used "a large number of idioms and terms of speech, which are characteristically Egyptian in origin, even though translated into Hebrew."{10}

Having received training in the most advanced literate culture of the day as well as having access to the Jewish oral tradition make Moses a remarkably able and likely candidate for God to use in documenting the founding of the Jewish nation.

Summary

Now let's consider the current state of Old Testament studies.

Since 1670, when the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1631-1677) suggested that Ezra might have authored the Pentateuch, source criticism has grown to such an extent that it has successfully removed serious consideration of Mosaic authorship for many scholars. However, the twentieth century has seen the pillars supporting the Wellhausen theory, also known as the documentary hypothesis, weakened or removed. The result has been the uncomfortable reliance by many scholars on a system of literary criticism that no longer has a firm foundation. As one Old Testament scholar has written:

> *Wellhausen's arguments complemented each other nicely, and offered what seemed to be a solid foundation upon which to build the house of biblical criticism. Since then, however, both the evidence and the arguments supporting the structure have been called into question and, to some extent, even rejected. Yet biblical scholarship, while admitting that the grounds have crumbled away, nevertheless continues to adhere to the conclusions.{11}*

Beginning at the turn of the century, scholars have challenged the divine-names criterion for determining authorship. W. F. Albright, who remained within the documentary camp, called the minute analysis of the Pentateuch after Wellhausen "absurd" and "irrational."{12} Hermann Gunkel, who introduced a new type of criticism called form criticism, came to the conclusion that "we really know nothing for certain about these hypothetical documents of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis."{13} In other words, he refused to accept the numerous authors for the Pentateuch, particularly the J, E, and P sources, that had been speculated about by scholars for decades. There are too many critics to mention by name, but the cumulative effect has been substantial.

Where does this leave us today? In one sense it has left the scholarly community in search for new foundations. But even for those who reject the possibility of supernatural revelation, the evidence from archeology, the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran, and information about the languages of the ancient orient are making dependence on the Wellhausen theory inexcusable.

There is a trend among scholars to view the Pentateuch as a literary unit again. Scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs, parallel narrative structure, and deliberate theological arrangement of literary units for teaching and memorization support viewing the five books as a literary whole.{14} If this becomes the accepted view, Mosaic authorship can again be entertained.

Notes

1. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding The Old Testament*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 37.

2. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), 81.

3. Ibid., 88.

4. Ibid., 85.

5. Ibid., 105.

6. Ibid., 106.

7. Ibid., 107.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 108.

10. Ibid., 113.

11. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 81.

12. Archer, 94.

13. Ibid., 95.

14. Andrew Hill & John H. Walton, *A Survey Of The Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 81.

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Christ's Inner Circle – The Primary Apostles of Jesus

Don Closson examines the ministry and role of the four most prominent apostles, Peter, Andrew, John and James. He shows how these primary apostles were changed from fishermen into true fishers of men through the power of the Lord.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Matthew 10:2-4 records:

> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Christians hold in high esteem (excluding Judas Iscariot) those who were personally called by Jesus and who walked with

Him during His ministry on Earth. That is especially true of the twelve Apostles. The Greek words used for apostle convey both the notions of sending or dispatching (*apostolos*) as well as the idea of commissioning someone with divine authorization (*apostello*). The idea of apostleship might be traced back to the Hebrew notion of an envoy. This Jewish institution would have been familiar to Jesus and is well documented in the rabbinic writings where it refers to "one who has been authorized to carry out certain functions on behalf of another." A well-known Jewish adage is "a man's envoy is as himself."

It is interesting to note that Jesus called to Himself those whom He wished (Mark 3:13-14). There were no volunteers. They were to travel, share food, and live with Jesus, experiencing firsthand His life and ministry. They were then sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, and that they had been commissioned to act as Jesus' representatives with His authority.

Lists of the Twelve are found in four places in the New Testament, and comparisons of the lists can reveal important information about the apostles. Peter is always mentioned first and Judas Iscariot last. The twelve are also listed in three groups of four, the first four always being Peter, Andrew, James, and John. This group of four apostles had a special relationship with Christ and will be the focus of this article.

Another interesting insight into the make-up of the group can be found in the process used to replace Judas Iscariot after his death. The first chapter of Acts states that Judas' replacement must have accompanied the apostles from the beginning. In other words, he must have been present at John's baptism of Christ and still around to see Jesus' ascension into heaven. It was also noted that he must have been an eyewitness to the resurrection. The apostles were eyewitnesses to the life, teachings, miracles, and finally the death and

resurrection of our Lord. This was essential for them to have a clear and accurate testimony of the Messiah.

In this article we will look at the inner circle of Christ's apostles: Peter, Andrew, James and John. We will see how God changed the lives of these ordinary men forever.

The Apostle Peter

In every one of the four lists of the Apostles found in the New Testament, Peter is always mentioned first. Peter is often called the *primus inter pares* or the first among equals. It is obvious that he plays a leadership role among his fellow apostles and is recognized by Christ as a foundation of the church. Although we might debate what this leadership role is, we cannot deny its existence.

The New Testament gives Peter four names. His Hebrew name was Symeon, which in Greek is Simon. Peter was probably a bilingual Jew who was influenced by the Greek culture in Galilee at the time. John records that Jesus gave him the Aramaic name Cephas which translates as Peter in Greek and means "a rock." This new name given by Jesus is an indication of how Peter would change while under the Lord's influence. Peter's early impetuousness would be transformed into that of a stable, charismatic witness for Christ.

Unlike many of the other Apostles, the New Testament gives us some background information about Peter's family life. His father's name was Jonah or John and we know that he was married. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14), and Paul mentions that Peter took his wife with him on journeys to various churches (1 Cor. 9:5). Peter probably lived with his brother, Andrew, in Bethsaida and later moved to Capernaum as he followed Jesus in ministry.

Peter became a disciple in the very early days of Jesus' ministry. John mentions an early encounter with Jesus after

Andrew introduces the two. Later, perhaps a year or so, Matthew and Mark record Jesus calling Peter to full-time ministry as a fisher of men.

As an apostle, Peter plays a significant role among the Twelve. Peter is often singled out and the rest are mentioned as a group with him (Mark 1:36). He also acts as a spokesman for the group. In Luke 12 he asks Jesus about the meaning of a parable. In Matthew 16 he affirms Jesus as the Messiah, and then in chapter 19 he reminds Jesus of the sacrifices made by the apostles as a group. He is often the first to act as well. Matthew 14 records Peter's attempt to meet Jesus on the water, even though he loses heart midway.

Peter's leadership role lends added significance to a number of events in the Bible. For instance, the detail given of Peter's denial of Jesus has its impact precisely because of Peter's prominence in the group. Also, the account in John chapter 21 of Jesus questioning Peter's love and admonishing him to "feed my sheep" takes on poignancy.

The Apostle Peter and His Brother Andrew

The Roman Catholic Church has long used Matthew 16:17-19 as justification for the office of the Pope and the succession of popes starting with Peter. Protestants have reacted by tending to downplay Peter's significance as a leader among the apostles and any special office that he might hold in the body of Christ. As I mentioned previously, Peter is clearly represented as the leader of the apostles. However, the use of this passage in Matthew to justify the modern office of the Pope reads too much into the Scriptures.

For instance, Matthew 16 says nothing about Peter's successors, their infallibility, or their authority. Part of the problem with ascribing these attributes to Peter's successor is that he would have had authority over a still living apostle, John. Peter is the first to make a formal

confession of faith (Matt. 16:16), but he continues on as a very fallible part of the team Christ has assembled. He is sent, along with John, by the apostles to Samaria, when word had come that some had accepted the word of God there. In Acts 11 the church in Jerusalem took issue with Peter's entering a gentile's home. Although they eventually agreed with his explanation, they still had the authority to question Peter's actions. In Galatians, Paul writes that he rebuked Peter to his face for separating himself from the Gentiles when accompanied by Jews from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11). The New Testament allows us to claim Peter as the leader of the apostles, but not the first in a line of infallible popes.

Where Peter is outspoken and prominent, his brother Andrew was happy to play a background role among the Twelve. Andrew worked in his father's fishing business with Peter in Bethsaida and probably shared a home with Peter until Peter's marriage.

Although Andrew is listed as one of the inner circle closest to Jesus, we do not have a lot of information about his ministry. He is first mentioned as a follower of John the Baptist. When John directs his followers towards Jesus, Andrew is quick to seek time with the Lord. After listening to Jesus for a few hours, Andrew is convinced that Jesus is the messiah and immediately begins to tell others, starting with his brother Peter.

Andrew has been called "the apostle who shared Christ personally." Andrew was recorded as one who brought people to Christ. First he brings Peter to the Lord, then at Passover he introduces searching Greek Gentiles to Jesus. When food is needed to feed the multitude, Andrew brings a child with bread and fish.

Andrew may not have had the leadership qualities of his brother Peter. He is never noted for his eloquent speech or his bold actions. However, one can imagine Andrew's heart when

his brother, whom he introduced to the Lord, preached in the power of the Spirit in Jerusalem, resulting in thousands of new believers. Andrew may have played a background role among the inner circle of Christ's followers, but it was a vital role just the same.

The Sons of Zebedee

James and John make up the other pair of brothers who were part of Christ's inner circle. Like Peter and Andrew, they were also from Bethsaida and worked together with them in the fishing industry. They were known as the "sons of thunder" because of their fiery temperaments, which would occasionally give rise to some awkward moments (Mark 3:17). Their father, Zebedee, and mother, Salome, were probably well off materially. The family is mentioned to have had servants (Mark 1:20) and Salome ministered to Jesus with her resources (Matthew 27:55-56). John implies that Salome is Mary's sister, making James and John cousins to Jesus (John 19:25).

Both James and John are members of the first group of four apostles, always mentioned first in lists of the Twelve. But they are also part of what might be called the inner three, those into whom Christ poured special time and teachings.

It is widely recognized that the designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved" refers to the apostle John. John stands out among the apostles as being the only one to have witnessed the crucifixion and afterwards, took Jesus' mother home to live with him (John 19:25-27). He was also the first of the twelve to see the empty tomb.

John was first a follower of John the Baptist. That meant that he was seriously seeking God prior to meeting Jesus and was primed to make a commitment to the Messiah. He and Andrew had an early encounter with Jesus before becoming full time disciples. Both had spent time listening to the Lord and becoming convinced of His authenticity. While with Jesus,

their temperaments became evident on a number of occasions. Luke describes an incident in which John asks Jesus if they should call down fire on a Samaritan village that had refused them hospitality (Luke 9:54). Having just experienced the transfiguration of Jesus, John was indignant at the lack of proper respect for his Lord.

There is also the well-known incident when Salome asks Jesus to place one of her sons at His right hand when He establishes His kingdom (Matthew 20:21). Jesus responds sharply to the request by telling them that they do not know what they are asking. He asks them, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” (Matthew 20:22) With their typical bravado, they answer, “We can.” They were still hoping that Jesus was about to establish a political kingdom in Israel. They did not realize that His kingdom would begin with His sacrificial, atoning death on the cross. It is somewhat fitting that James becomes the first martyr from among the Twelve. Acts 12 records that Herod Agrippa had James put to death by the sword probably around 42 A.D. (Acts 12:2)

The apostle John was an interesting combination: the disciple Jesus loved, and yet one who could be intolerant and self-seeking. James would be the first to die a martyr, and yet his brother would live the longest of all the apostles. Next we will look at the legacy left by the inner circle of Jesus and what we can learn from their lives.

The Legacy of Those Closest to Jesus

John writes in Revelation 21:10, 14:

> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Whether this verse refers to an actual city as many argue, or to the church or body of Christ, as others hold, it portrays the remarkable honor allotted to the Twelve Apostles. And among the Twelve, Jesus poured His life into an inner circle that had a key role in establishing the church. Peter, Andrew, James and John were privileged to be with Jesus when He healed Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), and at the Transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9:2). They were the audience at the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:3) and were with Jesus during His time of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37).

These four men left quite a legacy. Peter is credited with providing the material for the book of Mark and the two epistles given his name. He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem during the first 15 years covered in the first twelve books of Acts, after which James, the brother of Jesus, took over. Peter then became a missionary to the Jews and to a lesser degree, the Gentiles. Although tradition gives Peter credit for leading the church at Rome, it is unlikely. Yet he did go there near the end of his ministry and probably suffered martyrdom there.

The last mention we have of Andrew is in the upper room with Jesus. The book of Acts is silent regarding him. Tradition has Andrew traveling as a missionary to Russia and meeting martyrdom by crucifixion at Patras in Greece around 60 A.D.

We know that James was the first of the Twelve to be put to death. Thus he left no writings. Tradition has it that the officer guarding James was so taken by his testimony that he repented and was beheaded with the apostle.

Finally, we have the apostle John. Along with internal evidence from the book of John, early church fathers Irenaeus and Polycrates identify the apostle John as the "disciple Jesus loved." Having lived the life of an apostle the longest, John wrote the fourth gospel, the remarkable book of Revelation, and three epistles to the church. Of all Christ's

followers, John conveys the majesty of Christ the most clearly. According to tradition, John spent his last days in Ephesus, traveling there after the death of Domitian (who had exiled him to the Isle of Patmos). John's followers, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius, would become pillars in Christ's church, just as John had been.

Ordinary fishermen, these four men are a testimony to the life changing impact that walking with our Savior can have on anyone who chooses to be His disciple.

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Jesus: Political Martyr or Atoning God?

Introduction

Every Easter season journalists feel obliged to write something relating to Jesus and the passion narratives. This year our paper covered the current struggle many are having over the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. The paper quotes a seminary professor in Atlanta who has observed that more and more of his students are rejecting the traditional view of why Christ died and what His death accomplished. The professor says, "They don't consider Jesus a ransom for sin. They shudder at hymns glorifying the 'power of the blood.' They cringe at calling the day Jesus died Good Friday."{1} Yet even more serious is their rejection of a God who required a human sacrifice in order to forgive people. This version of God simply does not mesh with their views of how a God who "is love" would behave.

Although disturbing, we shouldn't be surprised. Our culture has been moving away from a biblical view of truth and toward the acknowledgment of just one moral duty or virtue, that is—tolerance. This new absolute requires that we be tolerant of every possible faith assumption and moral system except, it seems, the traditional Christian view of God and salvation. It's not that we have new information about the life of Jesus or the reason for His death. As a society we no longer want to hear about a God who is holy and requires satisfaction when His moral order is violated. This view applies the notion "I'm OK, you're OK to God." Maybe if we tolerate Him, even with His outdated notions of holiness, He will tolerate us in our fallenness.

Was Jesus just a political martyr, or was his death an atonement for sin? What is remarkable is that some individuals who claim to be Christian, who desire seminary training, reject what the Bible teaches about the nature of God and the salvation He has provided in Christ. When cut-off from the Bible, our perception of God can become a mere reflection of our culture's likes and dislikes. Even when the Bible is consulted, it is often interpreted through the lens of absolute tolerance. However, if the necessity of Christ's death for our sins is denied, the Gospel is no longer Good News and Christianity's message of grace is abandoned, leaving us with an ethical system with no basis for forgiveness or reconciliation with God.

Unfortunately, the Bible contains a lot of bad news. It says that because of the Fall we are in bondage to sin and the kingdom of Satan, and that without Christ everyone is separated from God and under His wrath. As a result, we all deserve death and eternal punishment. Why then do we call the biblical message Gospel or good news? How does the death of Christ relate to mankind's precarious condition? How has the church attempted to explain what the death of Christ accomplished? Lets take a deeper look at what theologians call

the atonement.

What Did Jesus' Death Accomplish?

As we mentioned earlier, the notion of God requiring a blood sacrifice for sin is becoming less and less palatable to modern tastes. It is not surprising then that many question the idea that the death of Christ was an atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins.

What did the death of Jesus accomplish? As we investigate this issue, we should keep in mind that the answer depends on what one believes to be true concerning the kind of person God the Father is, who Jesus Christ is, and the current condition of mankind. For instance, if God the Father is not all that upset by sin, or if Jesus was just a good man and no more, the death of Christ might be seen as an encouragement or example to mankind, not as a payment for sin. This, in fact, is the first view of the atonement we will consider.

In the sixteenth century Laelius Socinus taught that the obedience and death of Jesus were part of a perfect life that was pleasing to God and should be seen primarily as an example for the rest of humanity. Socinians rejected the idea of Jesus being a payment for sin. To support this view they point to 1 Peter 2:21 which says "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." As mentioned earlier, one's view of the atonement depends on his or her view of God and humanity. The Socinians taught that mankind is capable of living in a manner pleasing to God, both morally and spiritually. They accepted the teachings of Pelagius, a 4th century theologian who argued that mankind is able to take the initial steps toward salvation independent of God's help. This Socinian tenet became the foundation of Unitarian thought which rejects the notion of the Trinity as well.

There are a number of passages in the Bible that make the

Socinian perspective untenable. Even the passage in 1 Peter 2 works against their view. Jesus was an example for us, but verse 24 adds that, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the Jews the need for atonement, a way for God’s people to return to a harmonious relationship with God. The annual “Day of Atonement” sacrifice was instituted to cleanse Israel from all of her sins, thus removing God’s wrath from the nation. The book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus was the perfect high priest as well as the perfect sacrifice, making the final atonement for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17). Yes, Jesus was an example of a sinless human life, but He was so much more than that.

Views of the Atonement

Many modern day theologians argue that Jesus did no more than die a martyr’s death on behalf of the poor and marginalized people of the world. His death was more a political act than a spiritual one. As one scholar writes, “The salvation he brings is a transformation of the social order. . .”{2} According to this view, Jesus is to be seen as a political figure who challenged the power structures of His day and offered salvation through class warfare and the redistribution of wealth. Needless to say, this has not been the position held by the church for the last two thousand years.

In light of the Socinian theory, that the death of Jesus was merely an example and that salvation comes by living like Jesus lived, a response quickly followed by a man named Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). Where Socinus taught that we were only required to do our best and respond to God’s love for salvation, Grotius pictured God differently. Grotius focused on the holiness and righteousness of God, and the fact that

this holy God has established a universe governed by moral laws. Sin is defined as a violation of these laws. Sin is not necessarily an attack on the person of God but on the office of ruler that God holds. As ruler, God has the right, but not necessarily the obligation, to punish sin. God can forgive sin and remove humanity's guilt if He so chooses. Grotius held that God did indeed choose to be gracious and yet acted in a manner that teaches the severity of sin. As one theologian has written:

> *It was in the best interest of humankind for Christ to die. Forgiveness of their sins, if too freely given, would have resulted in undermining the law's authority and effectiveness. It was necessary to have an atonement which would provide grounds for forgiveness and simultaneously retain the structure of moral government.{3}*

Often called the "governmental theory" of the atonement, it argues that the death of Christ was a real offering to God, enabling Him to deal mercifully with mankind. The chief impact of the act was on man, not on God. God didn't need to have His wrath satisfied by blood atonement, but humanity did need to be taught the severity of sin and only an act of great magnitude could accomplish this lesson.

Although this is an interesting approach, it lacks scriptural confirmation. As one critic notes, "We search in vain in Grotius for specific biblical texts setting forth his major point." Being a lawyer, Grotius was attracted to the Old Testament idea expressed in Isaiah 42:21 which says that God will magnify His law and make it glorious. Fortunately, the New Testament reveals that God had a plan to both maintain His law and provide a gracious plan of substitutional atonement in Christ.

Views of the Atonement

Modern theologians like Dr. Marcus Borg, who teaches at Oregon State University, doubt that Jesus understood His death to be an atonement for sin. He teaches that Jesus was only aware of the political and religious implications of His actions.{4} How does this compare with teaching on this subject down through the centuries?

So far we have considered the historical views of Socinus and Grotius regarding the atonement. Both taught that the death of Christ primarily affected humanity. Socinus argued that Christ gave us a model to follow: a blueprint for living a good life. Grotius taught that Christ's death served to give humanity an accurate picture of the devastating impact of sin.

One of the earliest views of the atonement was quite different from both of these perspectives. Often called the ransom theory, this teaching was developed by the Church Fathers Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. It was probably the way Augustine thought about the atonement as well, and it was popular until the time of Anselm in the eleventh century (1033-1109).

Origen held that the Bible teaches believers "were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), and that Jesus told His followers that He was a ransom for many and that His death has delivered us from the dominion of darkness (Mk. 10:45, Col. 1:13). From this he surmised that Christ's death actually was a payment to Satan, buying, if you will, those held hostage by the fallen angel. Origen argued the death of Christ mostly impacted Satan, paying him off in order to gain the release of his captives. While it is true that we were bought at a price and have been delivered from darkness, the Bible never mentions that sinners owe anything to Satan.

Gregory of Nyssa held that God actually tricked Satan to gain our release. Satan thought he was getting a perfect man to replace the many already in his grasp. Instead God tricked him

by wrapping Christ's humanity around His deity. However, the notion that Jesus was offered primarily as a sacrifice to Satan didn't fit well with Scripture.

Instead, the Bible often speaks of the need to appease the wrath of God. Romans 3:25 tells us that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement or a propitiation. The Greek word used here carries that meaning of "a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God—and thereby makes God propitious (or favorable) towards us."{5} Hebrews 2:17 states: "For this reason he (Jesus) had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." 1 John 2:1-2 adds that Jesus "Speaks to the Father in our defense" and "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The impact of the atonement is not on Satan, but on God the Father.

The Satisfaction Theory

Did he die as a political martyr, having no notion that His death might accomplish something eternally significant? Or did Jesus and His followers assume that his death fulfilled a divine purpose? It is common for modern thinkers to discount the supernatural elements in their explanations of his death. For instance, historian Paula Fredriksen, professor at Boston University, argues that both his arrest and the events that followed probably shocked Jesus.{6} She implies that the death of Jesus and the birth of Christianity are to be thought of and analyzed only at the political or sociological level: that nothing miraculous occurred. This is obviously not the traditional view of the church.

Most evangelical Christians hold to an Anselmic view of the atonement. Anselm (1033-1109) was the archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century. He constructed a logical argument that God must, and did, become a man in the person of Jesus Christ because of the necessity of the atonement. According to

Anselm, when mankind sinned it took something from God. By rebelling against God's holiness and failing to recognize the authority that God has to rule, humanity failed to render God His due. Not only have we taken from God what is His, we have injured His reputation and owe compensation.

God must act in a manner consistent with His role of creator and ruler of the cosmos. He cannot arbitrarily choose to ignore a challenge to His authority. We cannot merely pay back or make reparations for our personal sin. Compensation is necessary for the damage done to all creation since the Fall, and this compensation is greater than what our deaths alone would repay: thus the necessity of both the incarnation and the atonement.

The Anselmic view carries with it some important implications.

First, it holds that humanity is unable to satisfy the harm done by sin. God had to act on our behalf or salvation would be impossible.

Second, God's actions show that He is both holy and just, and at the same time a remarkably loving God.

Third, this view highlights the centrality of grace in Christian theology. Each person must accept the infinitely valuable and gracious gift of God's provision for sin because our own efforts to please God will always fall short.

The Anselmic perspective gives believers a great deal of security. We know that it is not our works that earn salvation, but Christ's sacrificial death that paid the price for sin even before we committed our first transgression.

Finally, Christ's death on the cross highlights the horrible price for sin. With this knowledge we should be eternally grateful for what God has done on our behalf.{7}

Notes

1. Susan Hogan-Albach, “Christians struggle with the meaning of the cross,” *Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, April 7, 2001, 2G.

2. Ibid., 3G.

3. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 790.

4. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

5. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 254.

6. Hogan-Albach, 3G.

7. Erickson, 822-823.

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Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Aren’t Miracles Impossible?

Of the four canonical gospels, there are two, Matthew and Luke, that provide details about the birth of Jesus. The accounts may reflect the unique perspectives of both Joseph (in Matthew’s gospel) and Mary (in Luke’s), for there are many differences between the two.{1} However, of the things they

share in common, one cannot be missed. They both declare that Jesus was miraculously conceived through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a young virgin named Mary.{2} Today, some scholars regard the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth as simply a legendary development of the early church. The story is said to be myth—not history.{3} But if we ask why they think this, we may notice something very interesting. For the virgin birth is usually not rejected on grounds of insufficient historical evidence. Rather, it is more often rejected on the presupposition that miracles are simply impossible.{4} This is quite revealing. For if such scholars really believe that miracles are impossible, then no amount of evidence can convince them that one has actually occurred. Their minds are made up before they examine the evidence. In theory, they view miracle claims as guilty until proven innocent. In actual practice, however, they never reach a verdict of "Not Guilty"!

The belief that miracles are impossible often arises from a naturalistic worldview. Strict naturalism completely rejects any notion of the supernatural.{5} All that exists are atoms and the void.{6} If naturalists are right, it follows that miracles are indeed impossible. While strange things that we do not fully understand may sometimes occur, there must, in principle, be a naturalistic explanation for every event in the universe.

But are such naturalists right? Since my aim in this article is to explore the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, I will not attempt now to refute naturalism. Instead, I will simply point out that if a personal Creator God exists (and there is good evidence to believe that One does), then miracles are at least possible. For clearly, such a God might choose to intervene in His creation to bring about an effect for which there was no prior natural cause. And that is at least one way of describing a miracle.

Thus, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible.

And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. And if the virgin birth is possible, then the only way we can determine if it actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence both for and against it. Next we will continue our inquiry by looking at an ancient prophecy that some think actually foretold Christ's virgin birth!

Didn't Matthew Misread Isaiah?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was conceived through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit while Mary was still a virgin.{7} He then goes further, however, by declaring that this miraculous event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Isaiah. He writes:

> *Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which…. means, "God with us."{8}*

Some scholars are unimpressed with Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah. John Dominic Crossan unequivocally states, "The prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception."{9} Did Matthew misread Isaiah?

Let's acknowledge that the original context of Isaiah's prophecy may not be exclusively about the virginal conception of Jesus. The year is 734 B.C. and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified to learn that Aram and Israel have formed an alliance against him. Isaiah is sent to reassure Ahaz that God is in control and that the aims of the alliance will not succeed. Ahaz is told to request a sign from the Lord, a means of confirming the truth of Isaiah's message. But he refuses!{10} Annoyed at the king's stubbornness, Isaiah declares that the Lord will give a sign anyway: an *almah* (a

maiden of marriageable age) will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey upon reaching an age of moral discernment. But before this happens, the land of the two dreaded kings will be forsaken.{11} Should this prophecy be understood to refer exclusively to Jesus' virginal conception? If so, how does it relate to the promise that the Aram-Israel alliance would soon be broken and their lands forsaken (a promise fulfilled within twelve years time)?{12}

It's quite possible that Isaiah's prophecy had a *dual fulfillment*:{13} initially, in Isaiah's day; and ultimately, at the birth of Jesus. In this view the *almah*, or young maiden of Isaiah's prophecy, is a type of the virgin Mary, who later conceived Jesus through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit.{14} So although a young woman in Isaiah's day bore a child named Immanuel, Jesus is later recognized by Matthew to also be Immanuel, "God with us" in a new and unprecedented way. Thus, Matthew didn't misread Isaiah. And if this is so, we must continue to consider this prophecy in weighing the evidence for Jesus' virgin birth.

But even if we've correctly explained Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, we must still consider the alleged contradictions in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. We will address this issue in the next section.

Don't Matthew and Luke Contradict Each Other?

{15} Some scholars see the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke as contradictory. If so, their historical reliability is in doubt, along with their accounts of Jesus' virgin birth. But are these narratives really contradictory? Let's take a closer look.

First, some think Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph resided permanently in Bethlehem before Jesus' birth, whereas Luke says they lived in Nazareth and only came to Bethlehem for the

census.{16} But Matthew never actually tells us the couple's residence before Jesus' birth. He simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like Luke.{17}

But if Mary and Joseph resided in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth, then why, after their flight into Egypt, does Matthew seem to suggest that they intended to return to Judea rather than their home in Nazareth?{18} It's helpful to recall that Jesus was "the promised king of David's line."{19} Might not his parents, then, have wished to raise Him in His ancestral home?{20} This is actually quite probable. But regardless of their original intention, let's not forget that Matthew goes on to write that Joseph, being warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, did take his family back to Nazareth after all.{21}

Finally, some think Luke's narrative leaves no room for Matthew's account about the visit of the magi and sojourn in Egypt. These events could only have occurred after Jesus' presentation in the Temple, forty days after His birth.{22} But Luke 2:39, which concludes this presentation, says that when Jesus' parents "had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to . . . Nazareth." This raises a question. Does Luke's statement prohibit an initial return to Bethlehem, thus casting doubt on Matthew's account of the magi and flight into Egypt?

It's important to notice the emphasis in Luke 2:39. It's not so much on when Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, but rather that they did not return until after they had fulfilled the requirements of the Law.{23} Strictly speaking, Luke 2:39 does not disallow the events recorded by Matthew. Luke may not have known of the visit of the magi and flight into Egypt, or he may have chosen to omit this information. Either way, however, "the silence of one narrative regarding events recorded in another is quite a different thing from actual contradiction."{24} Thus, the virgin birth cannot be dismissed on the grounds that the infancy narratives are contradictory—they're not.

But aren't we forgetting the most obvious hypothesis of all? Is the story of Jesus' virgin birth simply a myth, comparable to other such stories from the ancient world? We'll examine this question in the next section.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Pagan Myths?

Not long after Matthew and Luke finished writing their gospels, some scholars began contending that the story of Jesus' virgin birth was derived from pagan myths. Unfortunately, such ideas continue to haunt the Church even today. John Dominic Crossan cites parallels between the deification of Octavius by the Roman Senate and that of Jesus by the early church.{25} In each case, says Crossan, the decision to deify their leader was closely connected with the invention of a divine birth story. The official biography of Octavius claimed the god Apollo in the form of a snake impregnated his mother.{26} Jesus' biographers claimed the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary conceived Him. In Crossan's view, neither story is historically true: "The divine origins of Jesus are…just as…mythological as those of Octavius."{27} The stories simply help explain why these men received divine honors.

Is Crossan's hypothesis plausible? One can certainly find scholars who embrace such ideas. But a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous birth stories in pagan literature reveals several important differences.

First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none "of the standard literary marks of the myth genre."{28} Matthew and Luke are written as history—not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological inquiry. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to

other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity."{29} Thus, there is a clear difference in genre between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious atmosphere of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman.{30} Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual intercourse, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. We are thus far removed from the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. There we find no hint that God's love for Mary in any way parallels the lust of Apollo for the mother of Octavius.

These are just two of many differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and the miraculous birth stories in pagan literature. But even these differences make the theory of pagan derivation unlikely. Remember, this theory requires us to believe that strict moral monotheists, who claimed to be writing history, borrowed some of the crudest elements from polytheistic myths to tell the story of Jesus' birth! Frankly, it's incredible. But could a theory of Jewish derivation still work? We'll conclude with this question.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Jewish Thought?

Some scholars have speculated that the story of Jesus' virgin birth may have been derived from an imaginative Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.{31} The story is not historical; it is a literary fiction of early Jewish Christians. It may have resulted from reflection on Isaiah 7:14, which says in part, "Behold, a virgin will be with child." What could be more natural than this verse becoming the source of inspiration for a legendary tale about the virgin birth of the Messiah?{32}

But would this really have been natural? There's actually no clear evidence that pre-Christian Judaism understood Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah at all, much less his virginal conception.{33} Indeed, many contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing whatever about a virginal conception and birth.{34} But if that is so, it would seem quite unlikely for early Jewish Christians to have read the verse in such a way!

Others believe the translation of Isaiah from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, may have provided the initial impulse for such a reading. The Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 translates the Hebrew term *almah*, meaning "a young woman of marriageable age," with the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning "virgin". Could this translation have led some Jewish Christians to conclude that Isaiah was prophesying the virgin birth of the Messiah? And if so, might they have invented the story of Jesus' virgin birth as the alleged "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prediction?

While one can claim that they might have done so, there's no evidence that they actually did. But if not, what could account for early Christianity's understanding of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah's virgin birth? Well, the historical reality of Jesus' virgin birth could have done so! After all, it's one thing to think that early Jewish Christians, without any precedent in Jewish thought, would invent the story of Jesus' virgin birth from an imaginative interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. But it's another thing entirely to think that by beginning with a historically reliable account of Jesus' virgin birth, they eventually concluded that Isaiah had indeed prophesied such an event.{35}

Only the latter hypothesis is supported by evidence. Particularly important in this regard are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These sources have been shown to be quite historically reliable. Their accounts of Jesus' birth, though apparently written independently of one another, are free of contradiction. Indeed, apart from an unproven bias against the

supernatural, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Thus, there do appear to be adequate grounds for believing that Jesus really was born of a virgin!

Notes

1. Such differences do not, of course, imply contradictions. See the third section for more information.

2. See Matt. 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35.

3. For instance, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), writes, "I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus' status and not a biological statement about Mary's body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant. . ." (23). And again a little later, "Jesus . . . was born . . . to Joseph and Mary." (26)

4. For example, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 61, Dr. Craig questions Dr. Crossan about his anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and whether they do not rule out the possibility of miracles a priori. Dr. Crossan admits that, insofar as miracles are concerned, "[I]t's a theological presupposition of mine that God does not operate that way."

5. Ibid. In fact, although it is difficult to pin him down this appears to be Dr. Crossan's position. At one point in the debate, Dr. Craig asks Dr. Crossan, "What about the statement that God exists? Is that a statement of faith or fact?" Dr. Crossan responds, "It's a statement of faith for all those who make it" (49). But suppose no human beings existed to make such statements of faith. In order to clarify Dr. Crossan's response, Dr. Craig later asks, "Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of

time when no human beings existed?" Dr. Crossan's answer is quite revealing: "Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you're doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask…'How is God apart from faith?' I don't know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don't know if it really has any point" (emphasis mine, 51). This answer appears to commit Dr. Crossan to an atheistic (and thus strictly naturalistic) worldview.

6. So said the famous Greek atomist philosopher, Democritus of Abdera.

7. See Matt. 1:20-25.

8. Matt. 1:22-23.

9. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* 17. He goes on to say, "Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning"(18).

10. See Isaiah 7:1-12.

11. See Isaiah 7:13-16.

12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). Ryrie comments, "Within twelve years after this prophecy, Damascus was captured by Assyria (732) and Israel had fallen (722)." (1024)

13. Although some writers object to the notion of a "dual fulfillment" of prophecy, there appear to be other examples of this phenomenon in Scripture. For instance, in Joel 2:28-32 we find a promise of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy is linked with various cosmic disturbances that will immediately precede the Day of the Lord. Later, in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter declares, "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel" (v. 16). He proceeds to quote almost the

entire passage of Joel 2:28-32. However, it seems that only the first part of the prophecy, concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was actually fulfilled in Peter's day. What's more, the book of Revelation seems to indicate that the cosmic disturbances mentioned by Joel await a yet future fulfillment (see Rev. 6:12). While scholars have offered various solutions to account for Peter's use of Joel in Acts 2, it seems best to understand Joel's prophecy as having some sort of "dual fulfillment": an initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost; an ultimate fulfillment before the second coming of Christ. The "dual fulfillment" view has the advantage of preserving the original integrity of the prophet's message, while at the same time recognizing that some prophecies may be Divinely intended to include more than one fulfillment throughout salvation history. In light of this very real possibility, we should humbly acknowledge that Matthew's use of Isaiah and Peter's use of Joel confront us with complex interpretive issues. It is partly for this reason that very capable scholars reach different conclusions about the meaning of these passages. After careful consideration I was inclined toward the "dual fulfillment" position; however, I recognize that others will want to adopt some other perspective.

14. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1024.

15. In this section I have relied heavily on the analysis given in J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 192-97.

16. I have chosen to examine some of the more difficult "contradictions." But it's important to point out that some of the alleged difficulties are quite easily dealt with. For instance, Luke records that shepherds visited the baby Jesus in response to an angelic announcement (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew, however, tells not of shepherds but of magi, who responded not to an angelic announcement, but to an astronomical observation (Matt. 2:1-12). But surely there's no contradiction here. After all, it's entirely possible that both the shepherds and

the magi visited Jesus! Doubtless the accounts are selective and have not recorded every detail, but this does not mean they are contradictory.

17. Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7.

18. Matt. 2:19-23.

19. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 193.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt. 2:22-23.

22. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 196, explains: "The visit of the magi could hardly have taken place during this forty-day interval; for it would have been impossible to take the child into the Temple when the wrath of the king was so aroused…Evidently, therefore, the flight into Egypt took place immediately after the magi had come; no visit to the Temple could have intervened. If, therefore, the two narratives are to be harmonized, we must suppose that when the presentation in the Temple had been completed, Joseph and Mary returned with the child to Bethlehem, received there the visit of the magi, and then fled into Egypt."

23. Ibid., 196-97.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1-5, 26-28.

26. Peter Jennings, interview with John Dominic Crossan, "The Search for Jesus," ABC Special, June 26, 2000. More general information about this ABC special program can be found at the following URL: http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/abcnewsspecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html. A conservative, evangelical response to Peter Jennings' ABC special was done by John Ankerberg, "A Response to ABC's The Search for Jesus: Part 1: Questions About His

Birth," The John Ankerberg Show (videotape copy), 2001. More general information can be found at John Ankerberg's Web site at: www.ankerberg.com.

27. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 26-27.

28. Norman L. Geisler, "Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 763.

29. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 39-40.

30. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 338.

31. This might be referred to as midrash, or midrash pesher, which "is an imaginative interpretation or expansion based on some OT text." B. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 60.

32. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 287.

33. Witherington, "Birth of Jesus," 64. See also Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 297.

34. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 288. See also, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17.

35. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 286-87.

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Christian Rumors

Madalyn Murray O'Hair

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

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

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

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

Some other rumors are harmful to companies. One example would be the false rumor that an executive with Proctor and Gamble announced he was a Satanist on the *Sally Jesse Raphael Show*. The original rumor had this happening on *The Donahue Show*. And then there's the rumor that the designer Liz Claiborne told the *Oprah* audience that she donates profits to the Church of

Satan. None of these rumors are true, yet these e-mails still show up in Probe's inbox on a fairly regular basis.

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

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

Janet Reno, Enemy of Christians

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

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

> *Are you a cultist, ACCORDING TO JANET RENO?? . . . I*

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

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

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

The Office of Legislative Affairs in the Justice Department says they believe the quote first appeared in the August 1993 edition of the "Paul Revere Newsletter" published by the Christian Defense League in Flora, Illinois. The group has been described by some as a "far right hate group" holding to

racist and anti-Semitic views. The newsletter subsequently ran a retraction.

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

Joshua's Long Day

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

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

As it turns out, the apparent origin of this story precedes NASA by many years. Harry Rimmer wrote about astronomical calculations recorded by Professor C.A. Totten of Yale University in his 1936 book *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*.{1} He quotes professor Totten, who said, "[A] fellow professor, an accomplished astronomer, made the strange discovery that the earth was twenty- four hours out of schedule!" He says that Professor Totten challenged this man to investigate the question of the inspiration of the Bible. Some time later, his colleague replied: "In the tenth chapter

of Joshua, I found the missing twenty-four hours accounted for. Then I went back and checked up on my figures, and found that at the time of Joshua there were only 23 hours and 20 minutes lost."

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

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

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

Darwin's Deathbed Conversion

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

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

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

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

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

Darwin’s daughter, Henrietta, writing in the *Christian* for February 23, 1922, said she was present at her father’s deathbed. “Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness. I believe he never even saw her, but in any case she had no influence over him in any department of thought or belief. He never recanted any of his scientific views, either then or earlier. We think the story of his

conversion was fabricated in the U.S.A." She concluded by saying, "The whole story has no foundation whatever."

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

Satanic Affiliations

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

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

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

A similar rumor surfaced in the 1980s when chain letters and petitions supposedly documented that the Procter & Gamble symbol was really a satanic symbol. According to the story, the company's historic "man in the moon" symbol was the devil.

And Procter & Gamble executives supposedly appeared on a TV talk show (Phil Donahue or Sally Jesse Raphael) to boast that their company gave some of their profits to the Church of Satan.

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

Notes

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

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The World in Our Worship

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

Choices in Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three Goals of Worship

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

Praising God

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

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

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

Building Up the Body

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nurturing Character

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

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

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

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

and nurture our character.

Subjectivism: Worship Beginning With Me Rather Than With God

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

"Me" As Subject

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

Seeing God As Subject As Well As Object

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

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

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

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

On Worship Killing Us

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Body Present, Past and Future

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

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

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

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

Speaking to our Society

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

Dumbing Down the Message

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

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

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

Bringing People Up Rather than Dumbing the Message Down

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

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

demands; and the people left as easily as they came.{19}

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

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

On Christians Getting Their "Meat" Elsewhere

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

Notes

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

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

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5 Lies the Church Tells Women

[Note: This article is taken from J. Lee Grady's book *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.* I do not subscribe to everything in this book, particularly the author's belief that there are no restrictions to women in the church. I do not agree that the office of pastor and elder are open to women, though I believe

God has given many women, including me, the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (which some find easier to receive when it's called "shepherd-teacher"). At Probe, we exhort people to be discerning in what we hear and read. Mr. Grady's book is firmly in the egalitarian camp, but as a complementarian who seeks to be discerning, I can recognize the truth of some of what he says without embracing what I believe is unbiblical. Please see the end of this article for other articles on the role of women I have written for our Web site.]

In this article I look at five lies the church tells women, inspired by the book by J. Lee Grady called *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.*{1} I'm not saying all churches say all these things, but there are certain pockets of Christianity where these lies are circulated.

Lie #1: God Created Women as Inferior Beings, Destined to Serve Their Husbands.

The first lie is that God created women as inferior beings, destined to serve their husbands. Those looking for Scripture to back up their beliefs point to Genesis 2:18, where God makes a "helpmeet" for Adam. "See?" they say. "Helpers are subordinate to the ones they help, which proves women are here to serve men." This ignores the times in the Psalms (10:14, 27:9, 118:7) where God is praised as our helper, and He is certainly not inferior or subordinate to us!

Lee Grady points out, "[I]t is a cultural bias, not a spiritual or scientific principle, that women were 'made' for the kitchen or laundry room. This is the most common form of male chauvinism, a burden placed on women by selfish men who want someone to wash their dishes."{2}

This view that women are inferior to men is not biblical, but it has infected the church from the beginning.

> *The Greek culture into which the early church was born viewed*

> *women as "half animal," unworthy of education, to be kept quiet and kept locked away, obedient to their husbands. In Jewish culture it was considered inappropriate for a man to even speak to a woman in public—including his own wife. A woman speaking to a man who was not her husband was considered to be giving evidence that she had committed adultery with him, and could be divorced. You can imagine the scandal Jesus caused when he regularly sought the company of women and talked to them, and taught them, just as he did men. Or when he allowed prostitutes to talk to him or pour perfume on his feet.{3}*

Eve was not created to be Adam's servant, but his honored and respected wife and co-regent, fashioned to rule over creation with him. We see another picture of God's intention for the first Adam and Eve in our future as the church. The bride of the Second Adam, Christ, is created and is being fashioned to reign with Him forever.{4}

Lee Grady says, "Jesus modeled a revolutionary new paradigm of empowerment by affirming women as co-heirs of God's grace."{5} Paul continued this completely new, respectful view of women by inviting women to share in the ministry of the gospel and the church, and by teaching the equality of husbands and wives in the marriage relationship (although there is a biblical distinction of roles).

When God created woman, He didn't create an inferior being, He created what He delights to call "the glory of man."(1 Cor. 11:7)

Lie #2: A Man Needs to "Cover" a Woman in Her Ministry Activities.

The second lie is that a man needs to "cover" a woman in her ministry activities. "In many cases, leaders have innocently twisted various Bible verses to suggest that a woman's public

ministry can be valid only if she is properly 'covered' by a male who is present. Often women are told that they cannot even lead women's Bible studies or prayer meetings unless a pastor, deacon or some other man can provide proper oversight."{6}

One woman was told that she could not start a backyard Bible school class in her neighborhood during the summer unless her husband agreed to be present at each session and teach all the Bible lessons. Her church elders said she could plan each day's crafts and make all the snacks, but a man had to conduct the "spiritual" aspects of the outreach since he is the proper "covering."{7}

It is disturbing to think of the implication of this belief. When we, as women, use our spiritual gifts and respond to God's call to minister in various ways (within the biblical restrictions for women) without a man present, is our ministry less legitimate and valid than a man doing the same work? What if a woman with the spiritual gift of evangelism senses the Holy Spirit directing her to speak to the cashier at the gas station, and there's no man around? On a personal note, when I am speaking at one of Probe's Mind Games conferences, do my lectures lack legitimacy or truth because the male Probe staff members are busy teaching in other rooms?

Ephesians 5:21 says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Out of respect for our own weaknesses and limitations, I believe that all of us who wish to minister to others should pursue an attitude of humble submission to the body of Christ. We need to submit our beliefs and methods (and content, if we're teaching) to trusted believers who can provide support, direction, and, if needed, correction. And anyone engaged in ministry needs prayer support, which some have called a "prayer covering;" although that is not a biblical term.

But there is no verse that says, "If a woman teaches My word,

make sure a man is present so she will be covered properly." Paul's instruction that older women teach the younger women doesn't include making sure that someone with a Y chromosome is present! What underlies this erroneous idea that a man's presence somehow validates any woman's ministry is, intentional or not, a profound disrespect and distrust of women.

Lie #3: Women Can't be Fulfilled or Spiritually Effective Without a Husband or Children.

The third lie is that women can't be fulfilled or spiritually effective without a husband or children. Some churches teach that God's perfect plan for every woman is to be a wife and mother. Period. Sometimes Christian women successful in business or some other professional field are made to feel unwelcome at a church, as if they are an unhealthy influence on "purer" women.

In some places, single women are prevented from leading home fellowship groups because they're single.{8} Others have been discouraged from running for political office or pursuing a graduate education because God's plan was for them to marry and keep house—even when God hadn't brought a groom into the picture!

Lee Grady says, "We must stop placing a heavy yoke on unmarried and divorced women in the church by suggesting that they are not complete without a man in their lives or that a husband somehow legitimizes their ministries."{9}

In some churches, women are routinely taught that the best way for them to serve God is to get married, make their husbands happy, and have children. They think this should be the sole focus of women's lives. And to be honest, when God has given a woman a husband and children, especially young children,

focusing her primary energies and gifting on her family truly *is* the most important way she serves God in that season of her life. Children will not be impressed with how many Bible studies their mother teaches each week. And most husbands will be less than enthusiastic for their wives to go off on several mission trips each year when it means the home is falling apart and everybody's life is in chaos.

But women, even women with families, are given spiritual gifts that God intends for us to use to build up the body of Christ, both inside and outside our families. When we exercise those spiritual gifts and abilities, God delights to honor us with a sense of fulfillment. And usually that involves ministry in the church or in the world, as long as it's secondary to our family priorities.

But not all women are called to marriage and motherhood. It is disrespectful to single Christian women to treat them as second-class women because they don't wear a wedding ring. It's heartbreaking and frustrating when a woman would love to be married, but God hasn't brought her to the man of His choice; it just adds unnecessary sorrow for the church to say, "Sorry, honey, without a man you don't have a place here."

Lie #4: Women Should Never Work Outside the Home.

The fourth lie is that women should never work outside the home. Women who take jobs are shamed and judged, because they can't please God if they do anything outside of being a wife and mother.

This is a hurtful lie to many women who don't have a choice about working or not. There are huge numbers of divorced and widowed women in the church who would much rather stay at home with their families, but they're the only breadwinners. And for many two-parent families, they honestly can't survive on the husband's paycheck alone.

This lie comes from a misreading of Paul's exhortation in Titus 2:4 for women to be "workers at home."

Paul wasn't calling them to quit their day jobs to stay home. Women in that culture had no education and usually no opportunities for employment. He was addressing a character issue about being faithful and industrious, not lazy and self-centered. This letter was written to the pastor of a church on Crete, a society known for the laziness and self-indulgence of its people.{10}

Before the 1800's and the Industrial Revolution, both men and women worked at home, and they worked hard. Whether farming, fishing, animal husbandry, or whatever trade they engaged in, they did it from home. The care and nurture of children was woven into the day's work and extended families helped care for each other. There was no such thing, except among the very wealthy, as a woman who didn't work.

This lie completely ignores the Proverbs 31 woman, who not only took excellent care of her family, but also had several home-based businesses that required her to leave her home to engage in these businesses. I personally appreciate this biblical pattern because I had a home-based business and a ministry the entire time my children were growing, both of which took me out of the home sometimes. I was able to grow my gifts as my kids were growing, and now that they're both adults, I am able to use those gifts and abilities more fully with my new freedom to leave home.

On the other hand, an equally distressing expectation common to younger people in today's churches is that women should always work, regardless of whether they have children or not. Our culture has so downgraded the importance of focused parenting that many people consider it wasteful for a woman to be "only" a homemaker. It's sexist to say that a woman's only valid contribution to the world or the church is to be a homemaker, but both extremes are wrong and harmful.

Lie #5: Women Must Obediently Submit to Their Husbands in All Situations.

The last lie says that women must obediently submit to their husbands in *all* situations. This lie really grieves me deeply, because it is probably responsible for more pain and abuse than any other lie we've looked at in this article.

In Ephesians 5:22, wives are commanded to submit to our husbands. For some people, this has been twisted to mean the husband is the boss and the wife's job is to obey his every whim. That is a relationship of power, not self-sacrificing love, as this marriage passage actually teaches. The wife is called to serve her husband through submission, and the husband is called to serve his wife through sacrificial love.

We have no idea how many women have been physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually abused by their husbands wielding the submission verses as a weapon. When they finally tell their pastor about their husband's rage-outs and physical assaults, they are often not believed, and sometimes they are told that if they would learn to submit the violence would stop. Then they are counseled that it would be a sin to separate and hold the husband accountable for what is a crime! Some abused women, who feared for their lives, have actually been told, "Don't worry. Even if you died you would go to be with the Lord. So you win either way. Just keep praying for him. But you are not allowed to leave."{11}

A comprehensive study on domestic violence in the church in the mid 80's revealed that 26 percent of the pastors counseled an abused wife to keep submitting and trust that God would either stop the abuse or give her the strength to endure it. About a fourth of the pastors believed that abuse is the wife's fault because of her lack of submission! And a majority of the pastors said it is better for wives to endure violence against them than to seek a separation that might end in

divorce.{12} I respectfully suggest that separation *with the goal of reconciliation* is often the only way to motivate an abusive husband to get help.{13} Just as we cast a broken limb to enable it to heal, separation is like putting a cast on a broken relationship as the first step to enable change and healing. We see in 1 Cor. 5 that God's plan for unrepentant believers is to experience the pain of isolation in separation from friends and loved ones; why would it be unthinkable for the same principle to be effective within an abusive marriage?

All the lies we've looked at in this article are the result of twisting God's word out of a misunderstanding of God's intent for His people. The way to combat the lies is to know the truth—because that's what sets us free.

Notes

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2. Grady, 23.

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4. Rev. 22:5, 2 Tim. 2:12.

5. Grady, 21.

6. Grady, 89-90.

7. Grady, 90.

8. Grady, 140.

9. Grady, 143.

10. "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'" (Titus 1:2)

11. Grady, 172.

12. Grady, 174.

13. I especially recommend Dr. Paul Hegstrom of Life Skills Learning Centers. He is a recovered abusive husband and pastor who wrote an excellent book, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse* (Beacon Hill Press, 1999). His Web site is http://www.lifeskillsintl.org.

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Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

Christ's last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today's church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible's insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . ."

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two

ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking "Christianese"—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, "[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation."{1}

Charles Colson writes, "We live in a culture that is at best

morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the 'Culture war' is over and we (the church) have lost."{2}

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let's see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

> Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.{3}

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."{4} Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, “There is no such thing as absolute truth.”{5} Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define “truth” in conflicting ways and both be correct.”{6}

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God’s revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, “I am the way the truth and the life. . . .” God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, “Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth.” Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the “belt of truth.” Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God’s truth is the foundation on which the church’s message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, "This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . ."{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

> If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer's conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.{10}

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through

His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.{11} 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.{12}

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."{13}

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."{14}

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches

that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world’s religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, “Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true.”

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband’s funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn’t say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn’t matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.{15} 30 percent believe

Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.{16}

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.' But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, "set apart Christ as Lord." Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer's heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member's life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word “answer” in the Greek is *apologia,* which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.{17} We can’t expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can’t give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe’s ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

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13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.

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Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church

Rick Wade examines the nature of the gospel message as oral tradition in the early church, and the relation of that tradition with the New Testament.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Introduction: Evangelicals and Tradition

Evangelical Protestants have historically considered the Bible to be the final source for faith and practice. Church tradition plays little or no role in our lives beyond the celebration of certain holidays. In this article, I want to look at one context in which tradition was very important in the church. I'm referring to the relationship between tradition in the early church and Scripture. In this study, I'll refer often to the book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*{1} by Daniel Williams, an ordained Baptist minister teaching patristics at Loyola University.

Most of us don't realize that tradition played an important role in the establishment of our faith. We tend to see the New

Testament and its development as separate from the life of the early church. In fact, if there's a dirty word in church history to evangelicals, it is "tradition." We think of tradition as something man comes up with on his own. Since what man produces is tainted, we want to keep it separate from Scripture. We don't think of the Scriptures—specifically the New Testament—as being a written form of tradition.

We need to note, however, that all tradition isn't bad. What the apostles learned from Jesus, they handed on to others orally, and what they handed on they called "tradition." Thus, the Gospel proclamation began as oral tradition. Recall Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6; see also 2:15. The NIV translates the word "tradition" as "teachings.") The apostles taught people who taught others who taught others, and this tradition was authoritative for the church. As the tradition was being conveyed orally, it was also being written down by the apostles and sent throughout the church. As the various local churches received these writings they weighed them against what had been taught orally. Many writings were circulating at the time, some of which falsely carried the names of apostles. The major test for the authenticity of these writings was whether they accurately reflected the apostolic tradition as taught in the churches.

Losing the Past

If evangelicals attempt to study the past, it's typically out of historical interest alone, not with a view to being taught by our forebears. While we're doing better at crossing boundaries with our contemporaries in the church, we forget that the church extends back in time as well. We tend to isolate the church in the here and now.

How is it that we've become separated from our past?

Individualism

First, we're an individualistic church. A fairly prevalent attitude in the church is that "me, my Bible, and the Holy Spirit" are all that we need to understand Christianity. In most debates today, what is the final word? "Well, it seems to me that . . ." It is considered impolite or even arrogant to tell someone he or she is wrong, especially in the area of religion and morality. This attitude has penetrated the church as well. It is considered rude and pretentious to say that someone's understanding of something in Scripture is wrong, no matter how gently and lovingly it is said. We think, "Why should we need anyone else to tell us what the Bible means?" We have let modernistic individualism take root in our psyches to the extent that we believe we are individually the final arbiters of truth.

Some consequences of this attitude, however, are disunity in the church, and the possibility of the intrusion of false teaching as individuals attempt to understand the faith by themselves. While we certainly are responsible individually to be in the Word and seeking to understand it, we learn from a study of church history that it is the lone interpreter of Scripture who can easily go astray. Theologian Harold O. J. Brown notes that "Solitary study, cut off from the fellowship of believers seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and lacking any awareness of the faith of the church through the ages, is often a source of serious error."{2} "Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church," says Robert Webber. "It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history."{3} As Daniel Williams notes, "Protestants must reconsider the work of the Holy Spirit in the life

history of the church no less than in the life of the individual believer. For it is with the church that God's new covenant was formed."{4} The Spirit is working to build the body of Christ, not just individuals. Each of us needs the church.

Anti-traditionalism

A second problem is our anti-traditional attitude. There have been several influences on our thinking about tradition. The Enlightenment era was very significant in this regard. Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today?{5} Besides, the church dominated people in the past. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.

This new attitude had an effect on the handling of Scripture. Bible scholar Christopher Hall writes, "Evangelical scholars assented to the Enlightenment's deep suspicion of tradition and proceeded to produce a traditionless hermeneutic. The 'Bible alone' survived the Enlightenment assault against tradition, but only by becoming a timeless text filled with facts to be scientifically identified, analyzed and categorized."{6} Now we were to interpret Scripture individually through a simple examination of the facts. "As [historian] Nathan Hatch observes, the Bible 'very easily became . . . 'a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.'"{7} There was no need to look to the past for help.

Thus, evangelicals came to believe that simply by using their

reason under the guidance of the Spirit they could understand the Bible as it was intended. Tradition and the history of exegesis no longer mattered. For some, it was a mark of triumph to be able to say one wasn't affected by what anyone else said about the meaning of the text. Some actually believed that a *lack* of formal training was beneficial for understanding Scripture!{8} Mark Noll sees this as "bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations."{9}

The Enlightenment's anti-traditional stance was fostered to some extent by Pietism, the 19th century movement encouraging a return to Scripture and ministry by lay people. Pietism served as a corrective in a church which had given the work of the kingdom over to the professional ministers. For all the good that it wrought, however, its emphasis on the individual and his or her religious experience encouraged a focus only on the here and now. The larger church, especially the church in time past, wasn't so important.

The Free Church Tradition

Following the Reformation, the Protestant Church split into multiple denominations or traditions. Out of the Anabaptist branch grew what is called the Free Church tradition. This includes such offshoots as the Baptist, Evangelical Free, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal and Bible churches. A core belief is that "the church is not an institution on account of its structure or external rites, but exists only when it is voluntarily composed of the faithful." Williams further explains: "There is little or no sacramental attribution to any place, thing or ritual, because only the believing members of the congregation are holy by reason of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. . . . The believer is free, therefore, to follow the faith in accord with his or her conscience . . . having no other ultimate authorities than the Bible and the Holy Spirit."{10} Thus, there is a rejection of authoritative

tradition of the church.

For whatever good this brought about, it also meant "The councils, the creeds, the grand theologians, the apologists, and the philosophers—all could now be abandoned." Protestants tend to look only as far back as the Reformation if they look to the past at all. What we must understand, though, is that the Reformers were trying to restore apostolic Christianity. In their disputes with Roman Catholics, they sometimes referred to the church Fathers directly or indirectly to prove they weren't guilty of theological novelty.{11} For all their efforts to restore the church to what it should be, what followed them was a splintering "into a multitude of conflicting versions of the faith."{12} In time, that which was common to all, the tradition of the apostles, was diminished in favor of an emphasis on our differences.

This way of looking only as far back as the Reformers has produced "a huge gap in the historical consciousness of the Free church."{13} We have little sense of historical continuity with the church from the early days up to the Reformation. Williams believes we are in real danger of amnesia, of losing our roots, of forgetting who we are. "The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining 'center' of Christian belief and practice."{14}

Constantine

Occasionally one will find references to the idea of a "fall" of the church following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. Some believe that under Constantine the church began its slide into a state religion, having been corrupted by power and money. The interests of church and state overlapped, resulting in the corruption of the church. This cast a pall over the whole of church history until the Reformation. Tradition is seen as an element of the

corrupted, institutionalized church.{15}

While it is true that the new freedom the church experienced under Constantine did have its negative side, it doesn't follow that the church "fell" as some say. Throughout history the church has made mistakes in its dealings with secular society and in knowing how to properly handle the freedom and power it has experienced. Some complain *today* that Christians become too wedded to political parties, courting compromise in the process. This was no different in Constantine's day. That there was a new coloring to the church when it became established under Constantine, there is no debate. But the idea that the church quickly became corrupt, and that the councils convened during his reign were simply pawns of the emperor is simplistic. The church continued to be faithful to the task of clarifying and passing on the apostolic tradition. "The faith professed and practiced in the early churches was not determined by the political machinations of emperors and episcopal hierarchies," says Williams. "The essential formulation and construction of the Christian identity was something that the fourth century *received* and continued to expand upon through its biblical exegesis and liturgical life as reflected in the credal Tradition."{16}

Consider what came out of the period of Constantine's reign. Says Williams:

> *I am claiming the late patristic period functioned as a kind of doctrinal canon by which all subsequent developments of theology were measured up to the present day. The great creeds of the period, the development of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the finalization of the biblical canon, doctrines pertaining to the human soul and being made in the image of God, to the fall and redemption, to justification by faith, and so on, find their first and (in many cases) enduring foothold in this period. All theological steps later taken, in confirmation or denial, will begin on the trail marked by the early Fathers. . . . The theology*

> *that developed after Constantine was not a movement radically subversive to Scripture and to the apostolic faith. On the contrary, the major creeds and doctrinal deliberations were a conscious extension of the earlier Tradition and teaching of the New Testament while attempting, in light new challenges, to articulate a Christian understanding of God and salvation.{17}*

The reason this is significant for our study is that some have let the idea that the church fell in the late patristic era cause them to discount the entire era. This is a mistake. There was good and bad for the church under Constantine's reign. Nonetheless, the church continued to develop in its understanding of the apostolic Tradition. We shouldn't ignore the early church because of occasional failings.

Tradition and Roman Catholicism

Because we so often associate tradition with the Catholic Church, it is very likely that the reader is wondering how this understanding of tradition differs from that taught by the Roman Church. Before beginning our look at tradition, then, let's distinguish what we're talking about from that which is held by the Roman Church.

In the first few centuries after Christ, oral and written tradition was thought of as being the same thing. The "canon" was acknowledged in either form. By the 4th and 5th centuries tradition and Scripture were distinguished more carefully, but still were seen as being of one piece. In the 14th century, however, tradition became a separate *source* of truth when it was realized that some traditions couldn't be proved from Scripture.{18} There were now, then, *two* sources of revelation—Scripture and Church—tradition, rather than *one* source in two forms. What the Reformers wanted to do was not to pit Scripture against tradition *per se* and throw out the

latter. They wanted to let go of man-made traditions and go back to the true apostolic tradition. “The sixteenth-century Reformers were cognizant of this distinction and highly valued the Tradition located in the Fathers as a means of interpreting biblical truth. . . . The Reformation was not about Scripture versus tradition but about reclaiming the ancient Tradition against distortions of that Tradition, or what eventually became a conflict of Tradition versus traditions.”{19} They wanted to avoid citing the church fathers as authorities for doctrines or practices, which were incongruent with Scripture. They rejected the idea that the ancient Tradition had become secondary to the traditions of medieval Catholicism. Tradition with a small “t” had begun to interpret Tradition with a capital “T”; the Reformers thus emphasized Scripture as delivering true apostolic Tradition to argue against Rome’s claim to authority.

While some branches of the Reformation retained some of the old traditions, others didn’t. The former wanted to be sure Scripture didn’t *oppose* them; the latter wanted to know if a tradition or belief was actually *taught* in Scripture. Man-devised traditions were to be set aside. This is the more dominant approach taken by the Free Church tradition.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on Scripture along with a suspicion of traditions in general worked together to produce an anti-traditional attitude that was unnecessary, and which has cut-off much of the church’s past from Christians today.

Apostolic Tradition

Tradition and Traditionalism

The Greek word that is translated *tradition (paradosis)* “means a transmission from one party to another, an exchange of some sort, implying living subjects.” It involves the idea of receiving and passing on. Williams notes that tradition is

"not something *dead* handed *down,* but *living* being *handed over*."{20} It is as much a noun as a verb, meaning "that which is handed over" as well as "the process of handing it over."

Note, too, that tradition isn't necessarily something old. As one scholar writes, "The scriptural use of the term *tradition* has nothing to do with oldness or with a practice or beliefs being time-honored. A tradition, in the strict sense of the word, becomes tradition the instant it is handed over."{21}

This kind of tradition isn't to be confused with "traditionalism," which refers to faith in tradition *per se*. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan contrasts the two this way: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."{22}

We often think of traditions as being *practices,* such as decorating a church a certain way during certain seasons, or conducting worship services certain ways. But traditions can be teachings—beliefs passed from one person to another. Paul referred to his teachings as traditions. He exhorts the Thessalonians: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6, *NASB*. The *NIV* translates the word "tradition" as "teaching.") Paul's job was to pass on what he had been taught so those who heard could pass it on themselves. This idea is expressed clearly in his letter to Timothy, where he said, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Tim 2:2)

Someone might object, pointing out that Jesus speaks only negatively about tradition. "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men," He says. (Mark 7:8) But notice: Jesus is chastising the Pharisees, not for holding to traditions *per se*, but for letting the

traditions of *men* trump the things of God.

Apostolic Tradition

The traditions that Paul passed on included three parts: the *kerygmatic* part, which was the core teaching of Christ (e.g., I Cor. 15); the *ecclesiastical* part, which dealt with matters of practice in the church (e.g., I Cor. 11); and the *ethical* part, which taught people how to live upright lives (e.g., II Thess. 3:6). Together, all this was simply called the Tradition (Williams and others capitalize the word to distinguish it from the individual traditions of churches that often distinguish them.{23}). "The Tradition indicates the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly."{24}

The Tradition, then, was the substance of the Gospel message passed on from one person to the next. "Tradition was an expression of the original apostolic preaching," says Daniel Williams. It was not "an extracanonical source of revelation . . . but a summary of the essential content of faith to which the Scripture, Old and New Testaments, testifies."{25}

Apostolic Tradition was transmitted through "baptismal professions, credal-like formulas, and hymns. Such vehicles were the primary means by which Christian teaching and spirituality was conveyed to believers."{26} The Tradition was also conveyed to the church in the writings that make up our New Testament. These, of course, were not an afterthought; they provided a fixed source of truth for God's people and eventually became the church's ultimate authority.

The Rule of Faith

The doctrinal core of the Tradition came to be known as the Rule of Faith. This was the "summary of the main points of Christian teaching." It referred "to the apostolic preaching that served as the norm of Christian faith."{27} "Those

elements of what the church believed (*fides quae creditur*), a kind of 'mere Christianity,'" says Williams, "are discovered in the *regula fidei* or Rule of faith."{28} The Rule was widely recognized by middle to late second century, and universally recognized by the early third century.{29}

Although there was no set form for the Rule of Faith, which makes it distinct from creeds, "the essential message," says Everett Ferguson, "was fixed by the facts of the gospel and the structure of Christian belief in one God, reception of salvation in Christ, and experience of the Holy Spirit; but each teacher had his own way of stating or elaborating these points."{30}

Here is perhaps the fullest expression of the Rule, found in the writings of Tertullian.

> *Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by*

> *Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.{31}*

The Rule of Faith served a few important functions. It provided a summary of the faith for new converts preparing for baptism.{32} It also was used to counter the heresies such as those of the Marcionites and the gnostics. Marcion's understanding of Paul's doctrine of grace hindered him from accepting the Old Testament God as the Father of Jesus. This rejection was reflected in his treatment of the New Testament. He only accepted Luke and Paul's writings, and altered even those to suit his beliefs. Marcion believed that only those would be saved who accepted his teachings. Gnostic beliefs, which had to be answered, were that Jesus hadn't come in the flesh, or that the Christ had simply borrowed the human body of Jesus in the incarnation. Salvation was obtained by obtaining certain secret knowledge. The Rule was used as a response to such beliefs. It stood as a known oral tradition against the gnostics' secret traditions.

Since even these opponents of apostolic Christianity appealed to the Bible for support, appeal was made to the Rule of Faith for the proper interpretation of authentic Scripture. Says William DiPuccio,

> *The Rule served as a canon within a canon, enabling the Fathers to ascertain the correct interpretation of the Bible in fundamental matters of faith, and as a yardstick for measuring the canonicity of a particular writing. . . . The Rule was regarded, then, as the lens or reference grid through which the Scriptures were interpreted. Clement of Alexandria makes this distinction when he declares that the first principle of his system is the Scriptures as they are rightly interpreted through the church's Rule of Faith.{33}*

As a canon of interpretation, it served as the "plumbline of

the truth." Without such a plumbline, "scriptural exegesis is left to the discretion of the individual interpreter or school of interpretation."{34}

Scripture, Tradition, and the Church

In the evangelical church, Scripture and tradition are typically set in opposition to one another. But in the early church the two worked together as two forms of the same message. As one writer notes, "It is not a question of whether Scripture *or* tradition has the primacy; nor is it even a question of Scripture *and* tradition; rather, it is more properly a question of *scriptural tradition*."{35}

At first, it was the oral Tradition or teachings of the apostles which was authoritative in the churches, because that was what people received. As the apostles' writings became available, they were accepted as authoritative because they were recognized as mirroring the Rule of Faith.{36} In the early church, Scripture and the Rule were never placed in opposition to one another; they taught the same thing.{37} These three—Scripture, Tradition, and the church—were considered one collective source for the truth of Christ. The Bible was to be interpreted by the church in keeping with the Tradition.{38} "Dividing Scripture from the Tradition or from the church," says Williams, "creates an artificial distinction which would have been completely alien to the earliest generations of Christians."{39}

It's important to note, too, that the Tradition was never held above Scripture.{40} The two worked together. "The Rule, then, is co-extensive with the Bible, but it is not above it," says William DiPuccio. "It provides the *optics* we need to bring the Bible into focus."{41}

One might ask, however, why the Rule *itself* was accepted as authoritative in the early church. Wouldn't oral tradition by

its nature be subject to contamination? What guaranteed it was *apostolic succession*. "Setting aside later alterations and/or distortions of this idea," DiPuccio says, "the original concept of apostolic succession (which included deacons or presbyters as well as bishops) was not so much a succession of ordination, as a succession of living *faith and truth* as these are embodied in the Scriptures and the ancient Rule of Faith."{42} Everett Ferguson gives us the thinking of Irenaeus on the matter:

> *A person could go to the churches founded by the apostles . . . and determine what was taught in those churches by the succession of teachers since the days of the apostles. In other words, the apostles taught those they ordained to lead the churches, and then these passed on to others what they had been taught. The constancy of this teaching was guaranteed by its public nature; a change could have been detected, since the teaching was open. The accuracy of the teaching in each church was confirmed by its agreement with what was taught in other churches. One and the same faith had been taught in all the churches since the time of the apostles.{43}*

Significance of the Tradition for Today

Does this issue carry any significance beyond historical information? Should the Rule of Faith have any meaning for us today? I think it does. First, it opens to us the teachings of the church fathers, providing a wonderful resource for understanding our faith. Once we recognize that the church didn't fall so precipitously in the patristic era and following, we can look to the church of earlier times for understanding and inspiration.

Second, by looking at the core message taught in the early church we can be reminded of the central truths of Christianity, which will give us a basis for evaluating

doctrinal teachings today. Paul warned Timothy of the destruction caused by false teachings, and encouraged him to remember his teaching and to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." (II Tim. 3:14) What Prof. Christopher Hall says makes sense: "The hermeneutical and historical proximity of the fathers to the New Testament church and its apostolic tradition demands that we listen carefully to their exegetical insights, advice and intuitions."{44}

Third, by seeing what is most important we can work to correct the disunity in the church. Think about what separates Christians in America. Right now worship style is a major issue. Ideas about end times and modes of baptism are two other divisive issues. When we think about our differences, however, do we stop to think about our similarities? Do we even *know* what people of other Christian traditions believe? We shouldn't minimize significant differences between churches. But by keeping our lines so carefully drawn, are we dishonoring our Lord who prayed for unity among His people? (Jn. 17:20-23) Maybe a look back will remind us of what is most important and around which we can unite. We can begin to break down the walls constructed by our differences over matters which aren't so clear or which aren't as important as the central truths. Without taking hold of the Tradition flowing from the apostles into and through the early church, Williams believes we will see an increasing sectarianism "characterized by an ahistoricism and spiritual subjectivism," and we will be more susceptible to accommodation to the world.{45}

Fourth, we can be re-connected with the church of the past. Simply knowing about the history of the church gives us a sense of being part of something big; something that stretches beyond the world we see. It lifts us out of our provincialism, thus expanding our understanding of God and His ways with His church.

Finally, we will see even more clearly how down to earth our faith is. We can see how it moved with the ebb and flow of real life as regular people (like you and me) did their best amid trying circumstances to understand and live out the faith.

Conclusion

By reopening the church's past we will find a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom which can serve us well today. By learning about the early church and church fathers one will be both encouraged and challenged. Both are important for a vital faith.

There are a number of resources available for those who are interested in probing the minds of those who have gone before us. Daniel Williams' *Retrieving the Tradition,* Christopher Hall's *Reading the Scripture With the Church Fathers*, or Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*{46} are excellent places to start.

Notes

1. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition, and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
2. Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition" in James S. Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 80.
3. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 128. See also Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation," 80.
4. Williams, 18.
5. Cf. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 24.

6. Hall, 25.
7. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Hall, 25.
8. Hall, 25-26. Cf. Williams, 22.
9. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 127, quoted in Hall, 26.
10. Williams, 2-3.
11. Williams, chap. 6, 173ff.
12. A. J. Conyers, "Protestant Principle, Catholic Substance," *First Things* 67 (November 1996): 17, quoted in Williams, 15.
13. Williams, 5.
14. Williams, 13.
15. Williams deals with this at length in *Retrieving the Tradition*, especially pp. 101-131.
16. Williams, 130.
17. Williams, 139.
18. Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Tradition" by J. Van Engen. See also Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 96.
19. Williams, 175.
20. Williams, 35.
21. Father Andrew, "A Response to Harold O.J. Brown" in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 201, n. 2.
22. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, "The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition" (100-600), (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 9.
23. Williams, 36.
24. Williams, 6.
25. Williams, 97.
26. Williams, 68-69.
27. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), s.v. "Rule of Faith," by Ferguson, 1003.
28. Williams, 92.

29. William DiPuccio, (1995). “Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and the Rule of Faith: An Ancient Key to a Modern Question,” *Premise II* (9), 5ff. capo.org/premise/95/oct/p950905.html.
30. Ferguson, “Rule of Faith,” 1004.
31. Tertullian, “The Prescription Against Heretics” Chap. 13, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3, 448-449, The AGES Digital Library Collections.
32. Ferguson, “Rule,” 1004.
33. DiPuccio. See also Williams, 97-98.
34. Williams, 99.
35. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 19990, s.v. “Tradition,” by Donald F. Winslow, 908, quoted in DiPuccio. One can see the organic unity of the oral and written traditions by noting that both were called canon, first the Tradition, and later the Scriptures. Cf. R.P.C. *Hanson, Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 78-79, and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1988), 77.
36. Williams, 45.
37. “Tertullian clearly states that the Rule is identical to Scripture in content, though not in form.” DiPuccio.
38. Williams, 97-98. See also DiPuccio.
39. Williams, 14.
40. Williams, 96-97.
41. DiPuccio.
42. DiPuccio.
43. DiPuccio.
44. Hall, 196.
45. Williams, 14.
46. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. This is a reworking of his earlier Common Roots cited above.

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The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

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

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

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

I pray my health club doesn’t close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won’t take.

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

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

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

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

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

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man’s real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with

students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

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

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

The Sources of Materialism

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

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think."{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, "We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality."{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

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

believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

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

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

Materialistic Temptations

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

Satan’s testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the

body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

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

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

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world

and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

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

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

message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

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

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

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

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God’s will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, “all the believers were one in heart and mind”(Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our

materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God’s kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God for the same today?

Notes

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

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