

# God and the Future: Examining The Open View of God

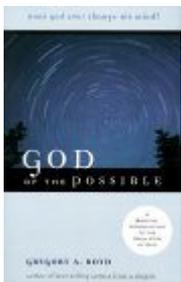
## Introducing Open Theism

What does it mean to be free? It at least means that one is able to make significant decisions. What if you discovered that all the choices you thought you made freely were mapped out in advance?

Here's another question. Does God know everything that is going to happen in the future? This has been the teaching of orthodox Christianity from early on.

But let's put these two together. If God knows everything that is going to happen, is there real freedom? Or, if we are truly free, can God really know the future entirely?

In recent years some evangelical scholars have rejected the view that God knows everything about the future. They say this idea is based more on Greek philosophy than Scripture. What they see in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, is a God who "flexes" with the actions and decisions of people, who even expresses surprise at what people do.



The view is called *open theism*. A number of articles and a few books have been written on the subject. For our discussion in this article I'll focus on a book by Dr. Greg Boyd, a pastor and professor of theology in the Baptist General Conference. The title is *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.[\[1\]](#)

Boyd asks the question: "Does God ever change His mind?" He believes God does, not only because of a change of heart and behavior on the part of people, but because God doesn't know everything that is going to happen in the future. As a result He modifies His plans in keeping with our decisions and actions. Open theists thus go further than Arminians who affirm that God didn't foreordain everything; they say He doesn't even *know* everything that will happen in the future. Boyd has two basic reasons for believing this. First, he believes this is the testimony of Scripture. Second, Boyd believes that complete foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. If the future is settled in God's mind, then it is fixed, and our freedom is only apparent.

But this doesn't mean God doesn't know *anything* about the future. He knows for certain those things which He plans to accomplish. "The future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it," says Boyd.[\[2\]](#)

What is at stake in this debate? For Boyd it fosters a renewed understanding of the importance and significance of prayer, it helps resolve the problem of evil, and it keeps us from feeling resigned to difficult circumstances. For traditionalists, it means a diminished view of God, a loss of confidence in the future, and a general loss of security.

In this article, then, we'll consider Boyd's ideas. In doing so, even if we disagree with him in the end, at least we'll have had the opportunity to think once again about the nature of our God.

## **The Classical View of God's Foreknowledge**

Christian doctrine was developed in a culture imbued with Greek thought. It was thus a product of revealed truths shaped by Greek forms of thought.

What did the Greeks believe about God? A fundamental belief

was that God was perfect and unchanging, that change of any kind was a weakness. Proponents of open theism say that this idea was taken into Christian theology, so that God came to be seen as being distant from and unaffected by His creation. It meant, for example, that He could not experience passions or deep emotional desires as we do, for that indicates a deficiency and the possibility of being controlled by outside forces. Likewise, God's knowledge was fixed; any change such as obtaining new knowledge or changing His mind would indicate an imperfection. This, open theists say, is a quite different picture than what we get of God in the Old Testament, a God who was seen as closely involved with His people, who was genuinely responsive to the circumstances of their lives.

The view of God as unchanging has remained the orthodox view since the early church.<sup>{3}</sup> However, it is overstating the case to suggest that Christian theology has been simply "Christianizing" Greek philosophy. There are numerous biblical passages which lend support to this idea as well.

In Exodus we read that God presented Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (3:14). Although open theists say this refers to God's consistent faithfulness to His people, traditionally it has been held to refer to God's nature as well. He has His being in Himself; He is *independent* of His creation (see also John 5:26). Furthermore, there are verses which are understood to refer to God's *unchangeableness*. Malachi 3:6 says "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." He is the one "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jas. 1:17). He is also said to *know* the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10). 1 John 3:20 says God "knows all things." Psalm 139 has several verses referring to God's knowledge of the writer's life from birth to death (vv. 2,4,16). Finally, Scripture presents a God who is *sovereign* over the course of history. Isaiah 48 speaks of the things God had "declared long ago," and which He now was bringing about (vv. 3-5).

These Scriptures and others have been held to support the traditional view of God's foreknowledge.

## Open Theism's Response to the Classical View

How does Boyd interpret passages that are held to support the traditional or classical view?

We should first note that Boyd believes God *does* know a lot about the future, specifically what He has planned to happen. What God does *not* know is the future free decisions of individuals. "The future is *partly* open and *partly* settled," he says.[{4}](#)

Boyd says some passages which are taken to teach that God knows everything about the future really only tell us God's *intentions* for the future. One passage is Isaiah 46:9-10 in which God says "I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Classical theists say this passage not only declares God's knowledge of the future, but that He knows the future because He planned it.[{5}](#) Boyd says, however, that God is only speaking of those things *He* intends to do. It doesn't say God knows *everything* about the future, but only those things which He has ordained will take place.

Other prophecies can be explained by the fact that God can perfectly predict our behavior in certain circumstances. God knows us perfectly, and He knows all the possibilities which lie ahead.[{6}](#) Boyd says God can predict a person's behavior because of His knowledge of the person's character combined with all future possibilities.[{7}](#) So regarding Jesus' foreknowledge that Peter would deny him, Boyd says that God "knew the effect Jesus' arrest would have on him." He used the circumstances to let Peter see how weak he really was.[{8}](#)

The interpretations Boyd gives to these passages raise questions, however. While the Isaiah passage doesn't say God knows everything about everything, it's hard to see how God could know for certain that His plans would work out if free individuals making free decisions along the way were involved, which surely they would be. The prophecy about Peter's denial seems strained. Jesus could certainly make predictions based upon Peter's character. But how could He know there would be three denials before the rooster crowed twice simply on the basis of Peter's character and the circumstances?

In his book Boyd gives an open interpretation of a number of other Scriptures typically taken to support the classical view. I'd invite you to buy the book and read his arguments first hand.

## **The Open View of God**

It's time now to take a brief look at Boyd's defense for the open view of God.

First, Boyd points to times that it appears that God *regrets* something He has done. Could God really regret having made man in the first place, as Gen. 6:6 says, if He knew all along what would happen? Similarly, how could God truly regret having made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:35) if He knew all along the direction Saul's life would take?

Second, we see God *confronting the unexpected*, Boyd says. In Isaiah 5 we read where God expected Israel, His vineyard, "to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (vv. 2,4). Boyd wonders how God could "expect" something that He knew eternally wouldn't happen.

Similarly, in Jeremiah we read where God "thought" Israel would return to Him, when in fact she didn't (3:6-7, 19-20). If He knew all along that Israel wouldn't return, isn't this a lie?

Boyd gives several other examples from Scripture in his book. He then concludes that the biblical witness is that God knows all of reality, but doesn't know the future free decisions of individuals. This means that "Future free decisions do not exist (except as possibilities) for God to know until free agents make them."[{9}](#) Thus, he says, "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out *how* people will choose *when* they choose."[{10}](#) If God *did* know everything in advance, then our decisions wouldn't truly be free. "The notion of a 'pre-settled' free action is . . . a logical contradiction," Boyd says.[{11}](#)

Does this mean God isn't omniscient? No, says Boyd. We aren't limiting omniscience just because we differ on *what* can be known. If something is unknowable in principle, God isn't limited if He doesn't know it. "The issue is not about God's knowledge at all," he says. "Everyone agrees he knows reality perfectly. The issue is the *content* of the reality God perfectly knows."[{12}](#)

Boyd explains further. A statement is true if it corresponds with something real. "But unless you *assume* that the future already exists, there is nothing for definitive statements about future free acts to correspond to."[{13}](#) Thus, there is nothing for God to know. To say that this means God is limited would be like saying God is limited because He can't make a square circle. It's an impossibility.

One response to this is that God knows all the possibilities available to us in any given situation, and He knows how particular individuals will respond to certain influences. Another is that the events of time exist in their totality in the mind of God, who has foreordained everything.

## **A Brief Critique**

A basic complaint open theists have against the classical view of God is that it makes God very remote; He is the cold,

unfeeling God of the Greeks who is unaffected by our decisions and actions. The open view sees God as truly interacting with His creation, as engaging in give-and-take with us. This closer, person-to-person relating is an important aspect of God's character, and we should take it seriously.

On the negative side, however, there are aspects of Boyd's open view which make it difficult to accept.

First, Boyd never explains how the future events which God *has* foreordained can be certain since the free decisions of individuals are always a factor (unless we're talking about events in nature or in the animal kingdom). He speaks of "predestined events with non-predestined players."[{14}](#) If God doesn't know the future free acts of individuals, how does He know that what He has predicted will happen?

Second, and perhaps most importantly, open theism has a serious problem with prophecy. Did Jesus really only make a prediction about Peter denying him based upon Peter's character? But the prophecy was so specific: three denials before the rooster crowed twice (Mark 14:30-72). When Ezekiel prophesied about the destruction of the city of Tyre, was that just a really good guess? It was too accurate a prophecy for that.[{15}](#)

Third, we need to question whether free will requires the open view of God. Can God know in advance the free decisions of individuals?

Open theists hold to what is called an *incompatibilist* position. That is, truly free choice is *incompatible* with God's foreknowledge. Many classical theologians, however, have held to a *compatibilist* position: free will and foreknowledge *can* go together. Those of a Reformed persuasion believe that "freedom" doesn't mean pure arbitrariness or spontaneity. There are a number of influences on our behavior about which we are rarely conscious, and God can use such influences

Himself.<sup>{16}</sup> Others might hold to what's called "middle knowledge": God knows all the possibilities the future holds and how we'll freely respond in each possible circumstance.<sup>{17}</sup>

While the open view of God is helpful in reminding us of God's nearness and responsiveness to us, the nature of prophecy, if nothing else, seems sufficient to render open theism implausible. While there clearly is interaction between persons when God meets man, this cannot take away from God's sure knowledge of future events. There must be some way that we can be free in a real sense while God knows what we will do. And because He does know the future, we can have confidence that what He has promised will come about.

## Notes

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).
2. *Ibid.*, 31.
3. Pelikan provides a brief sketch of the ideas of church fathers on this matter to show how thoroughly infused with Greek thought they were. *Emergence*, 52-55.
4. Boyd, 32.
5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 348,353. See also Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1907), 282, 355.
6. Boyd, 127.
7. *Ibid.*, 35.
8. *Ibid.*, 36.

9. Ibid., 120.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Ibid., 126.
12. Ibid., 125.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 44.
15. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN : Bethany House, 1997), 150-51. See Appendix One for several prophecies like this one which were too precise to be just good guesses.
16. Erickson, 206-209.
17. For a brief study of a Reformed compatibilist position see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 203-09. For a middle-knowledge view, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency," in Ronald H. Nash, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 95-115.

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## What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

*Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'*

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,<sup>{1}</sup> both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."<sup>{2}</sup>

When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

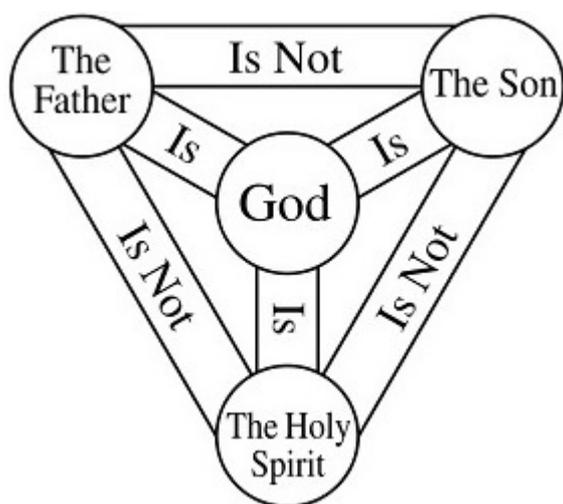
In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

## **Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview**

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the "secret handshake" of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that's a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important

thing about us.”{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, “It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.”{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, “God in three persons, Blessed Trinity.” Another handy definition is this, “Although not itself a biblical term, ‘the Trinity’ has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three ‘persons’ who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God.”{5}



Even though it’s short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let’s settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move

out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

## **The Trinity and the Christian Worldview**

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and

coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?[{6}](#) As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this “god with a small g” has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, “When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level.”[{7}](#)

The pantheist's commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence,

or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. "Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning." {8}

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, "Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God." {9}

## **The Trinity and Salvation**

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it's the only view that adequately describes God's work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of "God in one person" suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O

Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, “God is love,” (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, “In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not ‘big enough’ to be God.”[{10}](#)

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God’s mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, “a sacrifice of atonement” (NIV) and God the Father who is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, “[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God’s judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious.”[{11}](#)

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus’ words, “when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit

is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He “works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God’s absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe.”[{12}](#)

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

## **The Trinity and the “Everydayness” of Everyday**

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

*Entire sections of the modern church are functionally “non-Trinitarian.” I did not say “anti-Trinitarian,” for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship.*[{13}](#)

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let’s not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let’s dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this

blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

## **Worship**

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshipping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

## Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He writes, “Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?”<sup>{14}</sup> Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name” (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney’s words, “Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”<sup>{15}</sup>—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).<sup>{16}</sup>

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

# The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let's consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, "Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances." [{17}](#) The foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father." [{18}](#)

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

## Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see [Worldviews](#) by Jerry Solomon at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview* (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.
18. Ibid.

# Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about “God Almighty.” But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as an “act of defiance.”

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve he was horrified to learn of his father’s youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. “Jew! Get off the pavement!” a “Christian” had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a “wish fulfillment,” he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation’s leading journalists and

historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud's 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn's first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft's founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the "painful riddle of death," Freud once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson's death brought great grief: "Everything has lost its meaning to me... I can find no joy in life." In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer's pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God's love, who could tactfully explain the faith's rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology—and history—be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be "Christians" but don't have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. “Christians aren’t perfect,” reads a popular bumper sticker, “just forgiven.”

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life’s most difficult circumstances.

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# Christian Cliches

## Conversations and Clichés

Do you ever use clichés? Do you hear them often? No doubt you can answer “Yes” to either question. But have you stopped to consider what they may mean? Christians often use clichés among themselves and even with non-Christians, but there may be a need to give thought to the meanings of these oft-repeated phrases. That is the intent of this essay. We will investigate what is behind the “Christian clichés” that tend to become so much a part of our conversations.

Let’s begin by considering a dictionary definition of the word *cliché*. A cliché is a “trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and

impact by long overuse.”{1}

My ministry has put me in touch with Christians all over this country. As I engage in conversation with these Christians, invariably I will hear language about Christian things that has become “stereotyped” and has “lost impact by long overuse.” This doesn’t mean there isn’t truth contained in the clichés. Indeed, often there is truth of great importance for Christian theology and life. The problem is that frequently we use these clichés while thinking we know what we are saying. But do we? Could we explain these phrases if someone were to ask us to define them? My experience is that Christians have difficulty when asked to explain themselves.

Let’s listen to the following conversation and hear how a Christian named Tom responds to questions from a non-believer named Sam.

*Tom:* Hi, Sam!

*Sam:* Hello, Tom. Remember when you were to talking to Jim yesterday?

*Tom:* You mean before the sales meeting?

*Sam:* Yeah. I hope you aren’t offended, but I was listening to your conversation.

*Tom:* Oh, that’s okay. We weren’t having a private conversation. We were just sharing our beliefs.

*Sam:* Well, I'm curious about some of the things you discussed.

*Tom:* Like what?

*Sam:* Like when you said you have Jesus in your heart. Were you referring to the Prophet who lived so long ago? If so, how can you possibly have Him in your heart?

*Tom:* Well, yes, I was referring to the Jesus of long ago. But He is alive now, and He has saved me.

*Sam:* What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible. And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

*Tom:* I guess they sound weird, but they really aren't. You see, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and His spirit lives in me.

*Sam:* Tom, I don't mean to be rude, but such things sound ludicrous to me. Hey, my phone's ringing and I'm expecting an important call. Maybe we can talk again later.

Sam asked some good questions. They deserved answers. But was Tom able to explain himself? He had a difficult time, didn't he? For example, the phrase, "I have Jesus in my heart" had become a cliché for Tom. He was able to converse with a fellow Christian with the assumption that they understood one another. But it was a different matter when a non-Christian

expressed his curiosity about the conversation he had heard the previous day.

*I have Jesus in my heart* is one of several clichés we will consider. The goal of this article is to motivate Christians to give attention to our conversations and see if you find clichés lurking there.

## **I Have Jesus in My Heart**

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart*. As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

In the third chapter of Paul's Ephesian letter he prayed that his readers would "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . ." (Eph. 3:16-17, NASB). Galatians 2 contains one of the most powerful expressions of the indwelling Christ in Paul's life. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . ." (Gal. 2:20, NASB). In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul asks, "do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5, NASB). These passages, and many more, serve to show that the New Testament affirms that Jesus indwells His followers. Thus it is important to stress that when someone says *I have Jesus in my heart* it has biblical merit. A problem arises, though, when we use this expression without attention to its

profound message. When this happens we are using a cliché.

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 “the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing.”{2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted “that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God.”{3} In addition, we should realize that Paul’s favorite expression revolved around the phrase “in Christ.” This phrase “(or some cognate expression, such as “in the Lord,” “in Him,” etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul.”{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian’s life through the Spirit.

The second point of reference concerns the word *heart*. The Bible refers to the heart of man frequently. “The heart is the focus of mind, feeling, and will; it stands for the whole personality.”{5} Jesus is to “take up residence” in our whole personality. So when a Christian says *Jesus is in my heart* there is a literal implication. Jesus resides supernaturally in the believer through His Spirit. This is an astounding doctrine that indicates a transformed person! May our Lord lead us to continue sharing His presence in our lives by indicating that we understand truly what it means to say *I have Jesus in my heart*.

# I Have Faith

Is a Christian the only person who has faith? Many Christians seem to think so. On many occasions I have played “the devil’s advocate” among Christian groups by asking them to describe and defend their beliefs. One of the most frequent responses I get is *I have faith*. When I hear this I usually retort by saying “So what? Do you think that because you are a Christian you are given sole ownership of the idea?” After this I encourage them to think about the implications of the phrase. It is much more than a cliché.

All people, Christians and non-Christians, even atheists, exercise faith. That is, each day of our lives we apply faith in simple and profound ways. For example, you may take a pill of some kind today. That requires faith that the pill will help you rather than hurt you. If you travel on an airplane, that requires faith that you will arrive safely at your intended destination. Usually you don’t even see the pilots until you have landed. These are everyday illustrations of faith. But just what does this word mean?

A major dictionary provides us with intriguing definitions. The first entry states that faith is “confidence or trust in a person or thing.” The second entry says faith is “belief which is not based on proof.” And then in the eighth entry the dictionary declares faith is “trust in God and in His promises as made through Christ by which man is justified or saved.”{6} Obviously the eighth entry comes closest to a Christian understanding of faith. The first entry is also important to a Christian because it includes the idea of trust in a person. But it is the second entry that causes the most problem among Christians. Too many Christians use *I have faith* to mean they believe in something that is not based on proof. Unfortunately, this is when the phrase becomes a cliché.

For over 100 years, naturalism has been the dominant worldview in our culture. Among other things, this worldview bows at the

altar of modern science to the extent that many believe that nothing can be true until it can be proven scientifically. Many Christians have been highly influenced by this concept. Thus they tend to say *I have faith* when they can't "prove" their beliefs in a scientific manner. This reaction is not legitimate within a Christian worldview. It is important to realize that even an atheistic scientist takes faith into the laboratory. There are facets of his own life that cannot be "proven" scientifically. If he is married, he may say he loves his wife. Can that be proven scientifically?

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of "trust *in* a person or thing" (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already "proven" to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

The same is true for one who claims to be a Christian in our day. When we say we have faith, we should continue by declaring faith *in* the living God.

## **I'm Saved!**

When you say *I'm saved!*, have you ever considered what someone may be thinking? People who hear you may have a number of questions. For example, they may ask why you are speaking in present tense. If you are saved now, does that mean you were actually saved at some point in the past? If so, does the present connect with the past in some way? Or they may want to know why you needed to be saved in the first place. Were you drowning and someone rescued you? Maybe they would even like

to know if you are saved *for* something or someone. Proclaiming *I'm saved!* can be a strange expression if it is not explained. If someone asks for an explanation and we can't respond, we may be guilty of using a cliché. We think we know what we mean, and our fellow Christians may think they know what is meant, but a lack of articulation implies a lack of understanding.

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When we say *I'm saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that *Jesus will save*, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . ."<sup>7</sup> While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, "For my eyes have seen Thy salvation . . ." (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph's son was being called God's salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

Through these and numerous other verses we have a more complete picture of what *I'm saved!* entails. But there is a

crucial question leaping from such passages. If sin creates the need for salvation, then what is it? To put it simply, when the Christian proclaims *I'm saved!* his hearers should understand that “. . . sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God”{8} affecting everyone (Rom. 3:23). This is a crucial concept in contemporary culture that is generally misunderstood and rejected. In addition, such alienation from God cannot be rectified by “rightdoing.” It can only be rectified through Jesus' sacrificial payment for sin on the cross. I'm saved because of what Jesus did for me. In an amazing, life-changing way an event of the past brings salvation into the present. Praise God, we have been saved! Now we can live knowing salvation is in the present.

## **What Would Jesus Do?**

*What Would Jesus Do?* is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. “The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins, paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD.”{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

One of the more positive aspects of *What Would Jesus Do?* is that it can serve as a simple reminder of the Christian's moral life. Surely each Christian has a perspective of Jesus that includes the moral perfection that permeated His earthly life. There is no greater model to emulate than Jesus. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15, NASB). The same writer tells us He “offered Himself without blemish to God . . .” (Heb. 9:14, NASB). Jesus was and is the only one who could make such an unblemished offering. So asking *What Would Jesus Do?*, whether audibly or inaudibly, can awaken us to our need

for a moral model.

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask What *did* Jesus do? in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with “moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22).”{10} More importantly, on the cross “he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind (the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . .”{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus’ disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples’ reaction after hearing Jesus’ teaching. He said, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were “amazed” at His words. Jesus continued by stating, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were “even more astonished” and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” (Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

The actions and words of Jesus and the reactions of the disciples remind us of the deity of Jesus. Think of this in present time. If Jesus physically walked beside you, would you always know what He was about to do? “Jesus is unique in his identity as the incarnate Son of God, and we should not assume

that we could do or should do everything he did.”<sup>{12}</sup> Thus, caution is urged when we assume we always know what Jesus *would* do while we affirm what Jesus *did* do.

## Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.
4. *Ibid.*, 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, “Sin,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
9. Albert Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?”, *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hsu, “What Would Jesus Do About “WWJD”, 6.

# Why We Should Believe in the Trinity

*Dr. Pat Zukeran directly confronts unorthodox teaching on the Trinity, confirming the historic Christian formulation of one God in three persons—and examining John 1:1 in detail.*

## How the Doctrine of the Trinity Developed

The doctrine of the Trinity separates orthodox Christian teaching from heresy. This essential teaching of Christianity states that we believe in one God who exists in three separate and distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each member is equal in nature and substance. (For a biblical defense of the Trinity, see [Jehovah's Witnesses and the Trinity](#).)

A common question raised by heretical groups is, When and how did this doctrine develop? According to the Watchtower tract *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* this doctrine was not held by the church fathers. Rather, it was imposed on the church by the pagan emperors who had “converted” to Christianity at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. The bishops in attendance were overawed by the emperor and signed the creed against their inclination. Let’s take a careful look at what really happened at these two key church councils.

The Council of Nicea was the first church council ever called. Until this time, the church was under severe persecution from the Roman Empire. Early in the fourth century, the emperor Constantine showed an interest in Christianity and was tutored by Hosius of Cordova who held to the doctrine of the Trinity. With peace in the empire, Christianity spread all across the world. However, in Alexandria a presbyter named Arius gathered a significant following around his teaching that Jesus was a

created being and not God. As his teachings spread, the controversy grew and Constantine realized it needed to be addressed. He thus called for the first universal church council at Nicea to debate the matter.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity itself was not discussed, the doctrine of the deity of Christ was confirmed. In attendance were approximately 300 bishops, many of whom were divided over the issue. Arius with his supporters, Theonas, Secundus, and Eusebius of Nicomedia, held the view that Jesus was an inferior creature to God the Father. The orthodox camp was led by Bishops Hosius, Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Athanasius who argued that Jesus is God.

After hours of debate, the council concluded the following in their creed:

“We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. . . .”

While the deity of Christ—a crucial aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity—was affirmed, Arius nevertheless continued to teach his doctrine of Christ’s inferiority, and Arianism came back into favor for a short time. Fifty years later, in A.D. 381, the Council of Constantinople was called by Emperor Theodosius. Here the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed and further clarified. It is at this council that the Holy Spirit was declared equal in divinity with the Father and the Son.

The councils of Nicea and Constantinople did not establish a new creed. The councils clarified and formalized the belief in the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, views already held by the apostles and church fathers. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses contest this point. Let’s see if the church fathers who lived before the Council of Nicea, the ante-Nicene fathers, held to

the deity of Christ.

## What Did the Church Fathers Say About the Trinity?

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were never a part of the theology of the church fathers. In the article *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* several church fathers are cited as denying the orthodox view of Jesus. They include Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165, Irenaeus A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria A.D. 215, Tertullian A.D. 230, Hippolytus A.D. 235, and Origen who died in A.D. 250. The Watchtower list quotes from each theologian, claiming that they believed the inferiority of the Son to the Father. But the article contains no footnotes citing the source of these quotations.

Did these significant figures in church history really deny the divine nature of Christ? Let us take a careful (and referenced) look at what the ante-Nicene fathers stated in their original writings.

*Justin Martyr:* "...the Father of the universe has a Son; who being the logos and First-begotten is also God" (*First Apology* 63:15).

*Irenaeus:* (referencing Jesus) "...in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, . . ." (*Against Heresies* I, x, 1).

*Clement of Alexandria:* "Both as God and as man, the Lord renders us every kind of help and service. As God He forgives sin, as man He educates us to avoid sin completely" (*Christ the Educator*, chapter 3.1). In addition, "Our educator, O children, resembles His Father, God, whose son He is. He is without sin, without blame, without passion of soul, God immaculate in form of man accomplishing His Father's will" (*Christ the Educator* Chapter 2:4).

*Tertullian:* "...the only God has also a Son, his Word who has proceeded from himself, by whom all things were made and without whom nothing has been made: that this was sent by the Father into the virgin and was born of her both man and God. Son of Man, Son of God, ..." (*Against Praxeas*, 2).

*Hippolytus:* "And the blessed John in the testimony of his gospel, gives us an account of this economy and acknowledges this word as God, when he says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' If then the Word was with God and was also God, what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one; of two persons however, and of a third economy, the grace of the Holy Ghost" (*Against the Heresy of One Noetus*. 14).

*Origen:* (with regard to John 1:1) "...the arrangement of the sentences might be thought to indicate an order; we have first, 'in the beginning was the Word,' then 'And the Word was with God,' and thirdly, 'and the Word was God,' so that it might be seen that the Word being with God makes Him God" (*Commentary on John*, Book 2, Chapter 1).

Not only in these instances, but also throughout their writings the ante-Nicene fathers strongly defend the deity of Christ.

## **What Did the Apostle John Say?**

To summarize our argument thus far, we discovered that the doctrine of the Trinity was formally adopted as the official teaching of Christianity after the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. I argued against opponents who state that the doctrine was imposed on the church by Constantine in a political move. Rather, the Nicene Creed was a formal statement of a doctrine already articulated by the church fathers even before Nicea. Now, let us take a look and see what the apostle John teaches.

John opens his Gospel with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *In the beginning was the Word* shows that the Word was eternally with the Father and not a created being. The second phrase, *and the Word was with God*, shows that the Word is a distinct person from the Father. Thirdly, *and the Word was God* reveals that although separate and distinct, the Word in nature and substance is fully God.

Throughout his Gospel, John demonstrates that Jesus possesses the attributes which qualify Him to be God. Jesus displays power over nature, over disease, and even death. He has a grasp of the Law of God which He, though not formally trained, teaches with such authority as had never been seen before (7:14-16). Testimony from John the Baptist (1:29; 3:26-36) shows His authority to be God. Jesus also accepted the worship of men (9:38).

Jesus also makes several statements revealing His divinity. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." Here, Jesus commands followers to honor Him as they honor the Father. To do this, one must acknowledge Jesus as being equal in nature to God.

John 8:58 states, "'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am.'" The term *I am* is the term God used when He spoke to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Here is a clear statement of Christ declaring His divinity.

In John 10:30 Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." Jesus did not mean "I am one in purpose with God." He was claiming to *be* God. The verses that follow His declaration make that clear: "Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' 'We are not

stoning you for any of these,' replied the Jews, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (vv. 31-33). The Jews clearly understood His statement and Jesus does not deny their accusation.

The culmination of John's testimony of Jesus' deity is in 20:28, which is the conclusion he desires all his readers to come to. "Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" John argues throughout his entire Gospel for the purpose that all who read it might come to believe that Jesus is God incarnate.

## **John 1:1**

In spite of the overwhelming testimony throughout the entire Gospel of John, there are some who argue about the translation of John 1:1. *The New World Translation* of the Jehovah's Witnesses reads, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was a god," which makes Jesus to be an inferior being to God. In refutation of this translation, I will explain the Greek rules behind the proper translation and argue that the Greek word *God* (*theos*) in John 1:1c must be translated in the definite or qualitative sense—written *God* with a capital *G*—rather than indefinitely—a *god*—as the NWT has done. This discussion will get a little technical, but the importance of the subject deserves careful attention.

Let me first define some key terms of Greek grammar. An *anarthrous noun* is a noun without the definite article, the English equivalent of the word *the*. A noun in the nominative case in Greek often signifies that this is the subject of the sentence. A predicate nominative noun is a noun in the same case and is equivalent to the subject. The Greek construction of John 1:1c looks like this, *theos ēn ho logos*, and is literally translated "God was the Word."

The subject of this phrase is *the Word* (*ho logos*). We know this because it is in the Greek nominative case and it possesses the definite article *ho*. *God* (*theos*) is in the

nominative case and does not have an article. It precedes the equative verb “was” (*ēn*), and therefore is the predicate nominative.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses argue that since *God* (*theos*) does not have the article before it, it must be translated indefinitely. So we get their translation, “a god.” However, there are other possibilities available for translation.

According to a Greek grammar rule called Colwell’s rule, the construction in John 1:1c—anarthrous predicate nominative (*theos*)-equative verb (*ēn*)-articlar noun (*ho logos*)—does not automatically mean that the predicate nominative must be indefinite. Colwell’s rule, in summary, states that an anarthrous predicate nominative preceeding an equative verb can be translated as either (1) definite, (2) qualitative, or (3) indefinite. Thus, (1) as a definite noun *the Word* equals *God*, (2) as a qualitative *the Word* has the attributes and qualities of *God*, or (3) as an indefinite noun *the Word* is a *god*. Context determines which one it will be.

In the vast majority of cases in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, this construction is translated as a qualitative or definite noun. Greek Scholar Dan Wallace writes, “an anarthrous pre verbal PN [predicate nominative] is normally qualitative, sometimes definite and only rarely indefinite. . . . We believe there may be some in the NT, but this is nevertheless the most poorly attested semantic force for such a construction.”[\[1\]](#)

Furthermore, the translators of the *New World Translation* are not even consistent with their own rule of translation. Throughout John we find instances of an anarthrous *God* (*theos*) translated not as “a god,” but as “God.” John 1:6 and 1:18 are clear examples of this. Therefore, to argue that *God* (*theos*) in John 1:1c *must* be translated as indefinite solely because it has no article is clearly incorrect.

In an effort to insure that our decision agrees with the overall context of John's Gospel, we must see if the Gospel of John argues that Christ is inferior to God. As I showed previously, this is certainly not the case.

We must conclude that grammar and context argue against an indefinite translation that makes the Word an inferior being to God. The noun *God* (*theos*) should be translated "God," as a definite or qualitative, thus upholding the fact that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man.

## **Alleged Objections from the Gospel of John**

To close this discussion, I will address several problem verses in the Gospel of John that are used in attempts to deny the deity of Christ.

In some translations like the *King James Version* and *New American Standard*, John 1:14 reads that Jesus is "the only begotten from the Father." Some cults understand the Greek word translated *only begotten* to mean "to procreate as the Father."[\[2\]](#) In other words, God created Jesus. However, this definition would be inconsistent with John 1:1a, 17:5, and 17:24 which declare the eternal nature of the Word.

The term, translated in some versions as "only begotten," may sound to English ears like a metaphysical relationship. However, in Greek it means no more than *unique* or *only*. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is used of the widow of Nain's "only" son and Jairus' "only" daughter (Luke 7:12, 9:38 and 8:42). Its use in Hebrews 11:17 with reference to Isaac is particularly insightful. Isaac, we know, was not Abraham's only son. According to Genesis 16 and 25:1, Abraham fathered several other sons. Isaac is the "only begotten" in that he was unique; he was the only son given to Abraham by God's promise. Therefore, when *only begotten* is used of Jesus, He is the only begotten in the sense that He is unique. No other is

or can be the Son of God. The unique relationship the Son has with His Father is one of the great themes in the Gospel of John.

The next controversial verse is John 14:28. Jesus states, “. . . I am going to the Father for the Father is greater than I.” Here the Jehovah’s Witnesses understand the term *greater* to mean “superior in nature.” Thus they assert that Jesus is stating His inferiority to God. Once again, however, this would argue against John’s consistent theme of the deity of Christ. *Greater* here refers to position, not to nature. For example, we would agree with the statement that the President of the United States is greater than you or I. As the chief executive of the country he is greater due to his position. However, we would disagree with a statement that says the President is by nature better than you or I. In other words, is he a superior being to the rest of the citizens of the United States? No, we are all human and equal in nature. *Greater* refers to position, not to nature.

There is an established economy in the Trinity. The Father is the head who sends the Son. The Son sends the Spirit. All three are equal in nature, but different in position. This is called “functional subordination.” We see the same principle in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “. . . and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” The husband is greater than his wife, her head by position. However, he is not a superior being to his wife. The same applies to Jesus. The Father is greater by position, not by nature.

It is essential that we defend the doctrine of the Trinity, the foundation of Christian theology. Many of the great church fathers courageously defended this truth. Let us follow in their footsteps.

## **Notes**

1. Dan Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Zondervan), 262.

2. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 15.

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# End Time Anxieties

## End Time Concerns

This past January, the *Wall Street Journal* published a special edition that at first glance anticipated the arrival of the next millennium. However, on closer inspection it quickly became apparent that this edition was a spoof— the year on the masthead was the year 1000. Still, what was interesting was how similar many stories were to their modern counterparts—there was even an account of a sex scandal in high political circles. The underlying message from the *Journal* would appear to be that just as the transition to the year 1000 went off without a hitch, so too life will go on as we enter a new millennium.

However, it would be naïve to ignore the many threats that currently exist to civilization. Recent news reports indicate that North Korea has the capability to hit any part of the United States with nuclear warheads. China too has become increasingly aggressive militarily and has seriously eroded American technical superiority through espionage. And Russia appears headed to a return to totalitarian government; recently, the lower house of the Russian Duma voted to resurrect the forty-foot statue of the founder of the Soviet

Secret Police which had been toppled by pro-democracy marchers in 1991. Two years ago, the same house of the Duma had voted to resurrect the Soviet Union itself! On top of all this, there is an increasing awareness that the Y2K computer crisis may be much more problematic than anticipated; even the entire National Guard was mobilized for exercises in May 1999 to prepare for any disruptions the millennial bug may cause. Some fear a declaration of martial law should the problem get out of hand. Perhaps the advent of the 21st century will not be as painless as that of the 11th century after all.

Questions concerning the future are of special relevance to Christians. Contrary to other worldviews that see history as cyclical, the Bible teaches that history as we know it will come to an end with the dramatic return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the Bible has much to say of the end times, Christians have been exposed to a variety of end time scenarios which spell out in exacting detail the chronology of the last days. In this respect, we share much in common with those who faced the transition to the year 1000. The anxiety that many westerners experienced as the year 1000 approached was due in part to a theological concept popularized by the great Christian thinker, Augustine. According to Augustine, the millennial reign of Christ began at His first coming. Since the book of Revelation teaches of a 1000 year period in which Christ reigns over all the earth, Augustine allegorized this concept by teaching that Christ had bound Satan through His earthly ministry. This made complete sense to Augustine, since it would account for the tremendous growth of the church from a tiny band of first century Jews to the favored religion of the empire in Augustine's day. But when Christ did not return anytime in the 11th century, this interpretation was significantly altered.<sup>[1]</sup> History triumphed over exegesis.

As we approach the year 2000, some Christians are proclaiming that Christ's return is sure to occur within a few short years. One well-known Christian leader recently suggested that

the Antichrist is probably living today and that the second coming of Christ should occur in the next ten years.<sup>{2}</sup> In the current climate, it is necessary that we examine the end time anxieties that are prevalent today.

## **Adventism Old and New**

With the approach of the third millennium, there has been a noticeable increase of fervor among many sincere believers that Christ's return should be expected in the near future. As an example of this expectation, consider the success of the *Left Behind* book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This series, detailing the coming rapture of the saints, the horrible tribulation period, and other aspects of biblical eschatology, has sold over 3.5 million copies since 1995.<sup>{3}</sup> While it is possible that such a work would find a ready audience at any other time, it is probably not coincidental that such success would be attained as the new millennium approaches.

The increased emphasis by many Christians on the probability that the return of Christ is imminent can be attributed to an understanding of prophecy that has become especially popular in the last 160 years. This form of interpretation, which had been sporadically utilized throughout church history, is known as Adventism, the belief that Christ's second coming could happen at any moment and will inaugurate the millennial kingdom and the end of the age.<sup>{4}</sup> The early church lived in high expectation of Christ's imminent return, but by the third century that view became a minority. Throughout history, Adventism has appealed to religious bodies with highly rigorous ethical codes, since an "any moment" return would easily distinguish the lukewarm Christian from the true Christian. Adventists in history comprise a wide spectrum, from the heretical Montanists of the second century, to those groups associated with the Radical Reformation of the 16th century. And although Adventism was considered a minority

position throughout most of church history, today it is the predominant position among evangelical Christians, especially in the United States.

This change in interpretation came about through an innovative understanding of Scripture developed by John Darby, a 19th century pastor whose disillusionment with the spiritual condition of most Christians led him to conclude that the contemporary church was in apostasy. He therefore developed a philosophy of history, known as dispensationalism, which attempted to demonstrate how God's plan of redemption has unfolded under differing circumstances throughout time. It was Darby's interpretation that as the return of Christ draws near, the corruption and apostasy of the church would be increasingly obvious. It is through dispensationalism that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have been seen as symbolic of different periods of church history.[{5}](#)

Especially significant was Darby's idea that Christ's return would occur in two stages. Initially, Christ would secretly come *for* the saints just prior to the great Tribulation, to separate the true believers from the apostates and the unbelievers. Then, at the conclusion of the Tribulation period, Christ will come *with* the saints, in power and great glory, to establish His millennial reign.[{6}](#) The concept of a pretribulation rapture has become the dominant position among conservative Christians in the U.S., and at one time was a test of orthodoxy for many. However, this was primarily a reaction against liberalism's denial of Christ's personal return. Today, many Christians have agreed to disagree on this issue, as conservative biblical scholars have shown that both the midtribulation rapture and the posttribulation rapture are viable interpretations. While all three positions agree that Christ will personally return, the quandary is *when*. But as we shall see, attempts to determine the timing of Christ's return have invariably ended in failure.

## Words of Caution

In January 1999 a cult group from Denver was expelled from Israel after Israeli authorities determined that they had gone to Israel in the hope that their radical activities would actually provoke the second coming of Christ. Their leader had predicted that he was to die on the streets of Jerusalem, only to be resurrected three days later.<sup>[7]</sup> Of course, Revelation chapter 11 speaks of a similar occurrence when the Beast will kill God's two witnesses in Jerusalem. And although this cult group was certainly not composed of orthodox Christians, it is becoming increasingly evident that even many Christians are attaching special significance to the third millennium for the end times. Is there a biblical basis for doing so? Let's examine that question.

While the church has always looked for the second coming of Christ, it was the dispensational theology of the modern period that seemed to unlock many difficulties associated with prophetic fulfillment. Dispensationalism makes a distinction between Israel and the church, and anticipates the imminent return of Christ after Israel's restoration as a nation. Consequently with the re-establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many biblical interpreters became convinced that the end was drawing near. Still, it was not until the 1970's, with the publication of Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, that an easy to understand approach to biblical prophecy became available. This book seemed to unlock the many mysteries of the book of Revelation, and went on to sell millions of copies. Lindsey's work has remained popular, perhaps due to his attempt to show how the events in the book of Revelation are consistent with the contemporary world. For instance, the Kings of the East with the army of 200 million is said to be Communist China, while the King of the North is Soviet Russia. Written like a Tom Clancy novel, it convinced many Christians that we were truly living in the "last days." This type of interpretation led many to believe that the peace negotiations

which began in 1975 between Israel and Egypt was the very same peace agreement that the Antichrist is said to break in Daniel 9:27. But once again, history has disproved that theory as well.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this is that precise interpretation of biblical prophecy is risky business. Just as those who advocate a hidden code in the Bible only discover “predicted” events after the fact, so too Christians need to demonstrate humility when attempting to interpret apocalyptic images. A key to interpreting the book of Revelation is understanding the purpose of the book. The apostle John was writing to Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wanted Christians to understand that severe persecution could not prevent God’s victory over satanic forces. The Revelation was not written to satisfy our curiosity about future events, but to assure believers that God’s redemptive program will go forward.

Numerous times throughout church history, sincere people have attempted to discern the details of prophetic Scripture only to have their interpretation disproved by historical events. This often brings discredit to the cause of Christ. Even Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the history of the church, misunderstood the details of biblical prophecy. Like countless others, he failed to acknowledge the difference between the clear teaching of Scripture and end time speculations. Consequently, when interpreting prophetic Scripture we should acknowledge the distinction between the text and our own inferences, remembering to place primary emphasis on the *general* aspects of the text.[\[8\]](#)

## **Signs of the Times?**

As we are considering the possibility that the personal return of Jesus Christ is somehow connected to the year 2000, it is important to recognize that in fact many attempts have been

made to determine the approximate date of the Lord's return throughout church history. Jonathan Edwards, considered by many to be the most eminent American theologian, believed the 1,260 days of Revelation chapter 12 were actually years. Assuming that the start of the 1,260 years began in 606 a.d., Edwards concluded that Christ would return in 1866. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that the Pope was the Antichrist and would be overthrown in 1836.[\[9\]](#) This goes to show once again that even the most brilliant minds have been unable to correctly predict the chronology of the end times.

One of the main problems when making predictions of Christ's return has been the emphasis placed on signs of the times. Typically, predictions are based on signs that are assumed to reflect events predicted in Scripture. But when the disciples asked Jesus for the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, Jesus replied in very general terms. He spoke of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, and the preaching of the gospel in all the world. Scholars still debate whether Jesus is speaking of the Tribulation period here, or of the years leading up to the Tribulation. But it would appear that these signs that Jesus gave are fairly common events throughout church history. Only the proclamation of the gospel in all the world remains to be fulfilled.

Another aspect of interpreting biblical prophecy is maintaining the balance between the imminence and the delay of Christ's return. While many interpreters emphasize the "any moment" return of Christ, especially those who hold to a pretribulation rapture, it is clear that Christ warned His followers not to be disappointed if He failed to come when they expected Him. The Parable of the Ten Maidens (Matt. 25:1-13) and the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servant (Matt. 24:45-51) both emphasize the importance of remaining faithful, since the bridegroom and the master might not come when expected. Along with Christ's warning that only

His Heavenly Father knows the time of His return, it should be obvious why it is impossible to come up with a date for Christ's return.

Also, when we consider the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, we see that their fulfillment is not what many of us would call literal interpretation. For instance, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 that Elijah would return was fulfilled in John the Baptist. In Acts 15:16-18, James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to conclude that the Old Testament prophecy of David's restored tabernacle was fulfilled by the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel. And who would have ever thought that Hosea 11:1, which refers in the original context to God bringing Israel out of their Egyptian captivity, would be applied by Matthew to refer to Jesus' brief sojourn in Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:14-15)?

While this is not to suggest that we shouldn't diligently search the Scriptures for understanding God's plan for history, it is at the same time a reminder that the details of biblical prophecy are often difficult to ascertain. Acts 1:11 is one of many verses that affirms that Jesus Christ will personally return, but in Acts 1:7 Jesus Himself tells the disciples that instead of focusing on times and dates, they were to focus on the proclamation of the gospel. Those are good words for us today as well.

## **Our Prophetic Ministry**

As we conclude this discussion on the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures, perhaps it would be valuable to consider the *purpose* of prophecy. We frequently assume that prophecy is only concerned with the distant future when in fact many Old Testament prophecies were warnings by the prophet to his own contemporaries about the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, the prophet was often called upon to deliver words of comfort from the Lord. Ultimately, it was the responsibility of the prophet to proclaim the Word of the

Lord. Today, the primary responsibility of the church is to proclaim God's Word, the Scriptures. What we have attempted to show in this discussion is that, when interpreting prophecy, we must make a distinction between the explicit teaching of Scripture and inferences based on signs or current events.

Some teachers today seem to be suggesting that the Y2K computer bug will act as a trigger for a worldwide catastrophe that will signal the end times. While we do not want to suggest that any difficulties predicted for the Y2K computer bug should be easily dismissed, we would do well to place Y2K in proper perspective. Due to the prosperity enjoyed in much of the Western world, it is easy to forget the horrific suffering that Christians in other countries have experienced this century. It has been stated that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. It would be myopic for Western Christians to interpret a downturn in the economy as a signal for the second coming when our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries have been experiencing the type of oppression and suffering most of us cannot even imagine.

However, this is not to discount the possibility that the year 2000 may bring with it a period of relative discomfort. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Y2K computer bug will probably have a significant impact. Some news reports indicate that many smaller nations have failed to even begin addressing the problem. And the United States is certainly not immune from any computer failures either. When we consider how important international trade has become to our economy, there is probably going to be some kind of disruption in our lifestyles; many say we should prepare for the worst.

While this may sound frightening to some, it also points to a tremendous opportunity for the Christian to demonstrate the love of Christ to the world. There will be many people who will be caught unprepared for any disruption in society. Even now there are ministries like Joseph Project 2000 that are

gearing up to meet the needs of Christians and non-Christians alike should the situation arise. It is unfortunately true that personal prosperity can often lead to a rejection of God's provision. Christians need to be willing to share their resources and God's love with others if in fact there is a breakdown in society. It would appear that the Christian church has a golden opportunity right now to exercise its prophetic ministry of proclaiming God's Word for this generation. All too often we seem to be waiting for a future cataclysm where God Himself will act in a most direct way, rather than acknowledging our responsibility to act as His ambassadors to our contemporaries. This is why we must keep in perspective both the imminence *and* the delay of Christ's return. Any delay in the Lord's return is a reminder of God's great mercy and patience, who desires that none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

## Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1206-07.
2. CNN.com, "Falwell says Antichrist probably is on Earth now," January 15, 1999.
3. Steve Rabey, "Apocalyptic Sales Out of This World." *Christianity Today* (March 1, 1999), 19.
4. M. E. Dieter, "Adventism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 15-16.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 150-153.
6. W. A. Hoffecker, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 292-293.

7. *The Go2Net Network*, January 9, 1999.

8. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), 211 (See the entire chapter on 'The Revelation' for very helpful guidelines for the interpretation of apocalyptic literature.)

9. G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 33-34.

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## Churches That Equip

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

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

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

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

## **Conversation and Cuisine**

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching “postmoderns” for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. “It’s not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture,” he claims, “it’s just more difficult.” Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today’s postmoderns.

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

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

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance,

Hitler's Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

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

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

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

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

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

students are reaching students.

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

## **Spreading the Passion**

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

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

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

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

alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders.”

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

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. “I had no idea how to respond to him,” Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah’s Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah’s Witness members showed up at Jeff’s door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. “I was very uncomfortable at first,” Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

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

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

“There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church,” Haraksin notes. People want to know “Why can’t I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?” Society is on information overload, and some “people don’t want to take

the time to read and study,” which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

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

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

## **Issues and Answers**

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

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

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth

workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

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

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

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

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

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give

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

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

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# Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

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

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



## Background

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

now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

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

## Reasons for Persecution

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

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

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

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.[\[2\]](#) Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public

disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"[{3}](#)

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

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition."[{5}](#) A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.[{6}](#)

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

## Emperors

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

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.[{8}](#) But

that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.[{9}](#) In A.D. 62 he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.[{10}](#) Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."[{11}](#) Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since...A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."[{12}](#) Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.[{13}](#) It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.[{14}](#)

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

### *Trajan*

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even

if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.[{16}](#) Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?[{17}](#)

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

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.[{19}](#) Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."[{20}](#)

### *Hadrian*

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

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."[{23}](#) Philip

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

### *Antonius Pius*

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

### *Marcus Aurelius*

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

Although he didn’t directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We’re told that “a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people’s mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the

Christians.”{30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians’ “very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy...Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself.”{31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

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

### *Septimius Severus*

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

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent

persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.[{39}](#) Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.[{40}](#) A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.[{41}](#) A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.[{42}](#)

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

### *Decius Trajan*

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

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

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

### *Diocletian*

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

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.[{49}](#)

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

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't

disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

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

## Reflections

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

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

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

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

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

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

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let’s not forget

to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

## Notes

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4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
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10. Bruce, 165.
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13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
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23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
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25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
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28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
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32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
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35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
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41. Schaff, 58.
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45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.

55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.

56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com).

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# Reaching The World That Has Come to Us

## World Missions in Perspective

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

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

Immediately following the record of God's judgment at Babel, which resulted in the division of the human race into diverse nations and cultures, we read of God's selection of Abram and his descendants as His special people. God promised to make of Abram's seed "a great nation" and to "make great their name"

(Gen. 12:1-2). But He made it clear that beyond His intention to bless the children of Abram, God had a multicultural purpose in view: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was God's design that through Israel He might reach a world that had spurned His love.

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is found at the end of Matthew's Gospel; we call it the Great Commission. Among the final words of Jesus were his instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). And for the past two thousand years the church has been on a mission to penetrate every culture with the message of God's grace. In this way we've filled the role of Abram's seed in bringing God's blessing to "all the families of the earth" by going into all the world with the gospel.

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

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

to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee..." (1 Kings 8:41-43).

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

## **World Missions In Reverse**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Throughout the church’s history, God has continued to fulfill His purpose to extend His grace to every nation, not only by sending His people to the world, but also by bringing the world to His people. And the instructions He gave to Israel concerning their treatment of the international visitor are as valid for us today in our own situation as they were for them so many centuries ago!

## **The World at Our Doorstep**

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

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

First, more than half of these students generally come from countries that restrict or prohibit traditional Christian ministry within their borders. It’s difficult to carry on the work of Christian ministry in countries like China, Malaysia, or Nepal. Yet each of these countries sends many students to

the U.S. every year. In fact, approximately sixty percent of the international students in the U.S. come from what is known as the "10/40 Window." This is the group of countries located in the area between the 10th and 40th degree northern parallels, in which 90 percent of the world's "unreached peoples" reside! As one person has put it, "The door into these countries may be closed or barely open, but the door out is wide open!"

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

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

Some time ago a study was done to determine the factors which contributed to the adjustment of international students to their stay in America. It was found that those who were best

adjusted to their sojourn in the U.S. had two things in common. First, they had a close friend from their home country. And second, they had forged a close friendship with an American. Yet it was also found that no more than twenty percent of international students have such a friendship with an American, and fewer still have ever stepped foot inside an American home!

## **Students Among Us**

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

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

government, agriculture, the arts, and Christian ministry.

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

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

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

## **Reaching Out**

We've noted that at least half of these students come from

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

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

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

The other element God used in drawing these students to Himself was a careful exposure to the Scriptures. In many cases, we may be surprised to learn that our international friend has never even opened a Bible before we invite him or her to study it with us. I recall one Chinese student who stated to me at the outset of a personal study, "This is my first exposure to the Bible." Another student agreed to meet over lunch once a week to study the Scriptures. He told me as we began our series of studies, "I'm open to God." Several months later, after completing an overview of the life of Christ, I asked him who he believed Jesus Christ to be. He said to me, "Jesus is the Son of God. And He is my Savior."

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

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## **Notes**

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

## **Resources**

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

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

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

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

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# **The Debate Over the King James Version – Which Is the Best Translation for My Personal Use**

Written by Rick Wade

*Which version of the Bible is the most reliable and authoritative providing me with understanding of God's revelation? Rick Wade provides a balanced comparison of the King James Bible with other more recent translations to help you answer this question for yourself.*

## **Introduction: What the Debate is About**

Have you ever been in a Bible study where everyone in the group reads a verse . . . and there are two or three Bible versions being used? Following the train of thought can be difficult when a verse in one version clashes with the next verse in another version.

Since the 1940s, many new Bible versions have appeared on the market: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Living Bible, the Contemporary English Version, The Message, and many more. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the King James was still the dominant version. Today the New International Version leads sales followed by the KJV.(1)

For some people, the multiplicity of versions is a nuisance, but they accept it, believing that it is all a matter of personal preference. For others, however, this is a serious issue; not because of the inconvenience of multiple versions, but because they believe the King James Version is the only correct version for the church.

These new versions came about because of the publication of a new Greek New Testament about a century ago. Defenders of the primacy of the KJV were very vocal in their opposition to the new Greek text and the new English versions which followed its publication. This issue is not as big today, but it remains problematic for some Christians. Thus, a discussion of the King James/modern version debate is useful with a focus on the New Testament, for that is where the main concerns lie.

This debate is argued on two levels. On one level, the focus is on the King James itself (remember that our English versions are translated from Greek texts). Some simply believe that this particular translation is the best one. They see a certain majesty in its language, and they appreciate its important role in the history of the church. It has served the church well, so there is no need to begin confusing things by bringing in all those other versions, they believe.

There are some Christians, however, who go further than that. They believe that the KJV is not only the *best* version; they insist that it is the only valid English version. Newer translations of Scripture do not reliably convey God's truth. Some arguments for this side are little more than angry diatribes which are often circular. For example, some say that since the new versions differ from the King James, they are bad versions. The supremacy of the KJV is simply assumed.(2)

Although arguments from tradition and style can be powerful, there might be other considerations which outweigh them. A significant problem with the KJV, of course, is the language. People who did not grow up using the KJV have a hard time understanding it. Some of its words are no longer in use, and the antiquated forms of many words impede the understanding of the text. Over time they can learn to understand it, but without any more compelling reasons than tradition and style, it is hard to see why they should bother.

On another level, this debate focuses on the Greek manuscripts from which the English versions are translated. Some "King James only" proponents believe that the Greek text underlying most of the newer versions is corrupt. As we will see, they present some good arguments for their position.

Because the Greek text is the critical issue in this debate, it will be the focus of our examination of the debate (we will not get too technical!). To set the stage, we will begin with a brief history of the King James Version.

# A Brief History of the King James Version

Many of us have heard the joke about the King James Version: "If it was good enough for the apostle Paul, it is good enough for me!" Paul, of course, was fifteen and a half centuries too early for the KJV. The New Testament writers wrote in Koine Greek, the language of the common man in the first century A.D. The first complete English Bible was not produced until John Wycliffe produced his in the fourteenth century. He translated from the Latin Vulgate which was the most widely used version at that time.

The next major step in the development of the English Bible was Tyndale's translation of the New Testament published in 1526 and portions of the Old Testament published later. Tyndale's version was significant because it was translated from a newly published Greek New Testament rather than from the Vulgate.

After Tyndale's, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops' Bible. In 1611 the King James Version was published to provide a Bible which could be used by both Anglicans and Puritans. Marginal notes reflecting any particular theological bias were removed, and the language used was that of the people.

I noted earlier that Tyndale used a Greek text for his translation. The first published Greek New Testament appeared in the year 1516. It was edited by Erasmus, a Dutch scholar. Erasmus had at his disposal no more than six Greek manuscripts (we have thousands at our disposal today). These manuscripts were part of what is called the *Byzantine* text family.

Although Erasmus' edition provided a great boost to the study of the New Testament, it had a number of problems. For one thing, none of his sources had the last six verses of the book of Revelation, so Erasmus translated from the Latin Vulgate

back into Greek! Thus, in his text “several words and phrases may be found that are attested in no Greek manuscript whatsoever.”(3) In the first two editions of his New Testament, Erasmus left out I John 5:7 because it did not appear in any of his Greek manuscripts. That verse reads: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” This omission created a furor, so he promised to include the verse in a later edition if it could be found in any Greek manuscript. One was brought forward, and, although Erasmus did not think the text was genuine, he kept his promise and included the verse. It is now believed to have been a very late and unreliable manuscript, and some think it was forged to include the verse.(4)

Erasmus’ Greek text was reworked and reprinted by others including Robert Estienne who divided the text into verses. Theodore Beza then built upon Estienne’s work, and his Greek text provided one of the major foundations for the King James Bible. The term *Textus Receptus*, or Received Text, came from a blurb in another Greek text produced in the early seventeenth century by the Elzevir brothers. This title is still used in connection with the King James, and it is one you will see again in this article.

## **Westcott and Hort**

I noted earlier that the more substantial arguments for the “King James only” position focus on the Greek texts underlying the different versions. There are four significant issues in the debate involving these texts which I will develop: the science of textual criticism, the number of Greek manuscripts available, the history of the Greek texts, and the dates of the manuscripts.

Before getting into the debate itself, it will be helpful to mention the historical event which brought the debate to a head, and to introduce a central element in New Testament

textual studies.

Between the thousands of Greek manuscripts available there are differences of one kind or another (although there are not any which effect doctrinal matters). Certain Greek manuscripts share enough similarities that they are believed to have come from the same source. Each of these groups is called a text *family* or a *text-type*. There are four text families which are generally agreed upon by scholars. The manuscripts which were used to produce the Textus Receptus (and later the King James Version) were of the Byzantine family. The other three text families generally agreed upon by scholars are the Alexandrian, the Caesarean, and the Western.(5)

The fundamental debate between scholars in the King James/modern version controversy is over the question of the most accurate Greek text family or families. Which of the four families, if any, most accurately represents what the New Testament authors wrote? The Byzantine text was the dominant Greek text from about the eighth century until the end of the nineteenth century.(6) In 1881, however, two scholars named Westcott and Hort published a new Greek New Testament which relied more on other text families than on the Byzantine family. Their Greek text became the basis of the New Testament portion of modern Bible translations.

Westcott and Hort evaluated the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament according to the principles of *textual criticism*. This is the science of the study of ancient texts, the originals of which are lost. Based upon their studies, they argued that the Byzantine text was *not* the closest to the original writings as the King James advocates claimed. It seemed to have combined readings from other text families, and some readings appeared to have been modified for greater clarity and understanding. Thus, they believed it was at least two steps removed from the original writings. Also, they found no clear evidence of its existence in the writings of the early church fathers, and there are no copies older than the

fourth century. Those who agree with Westcott and Hort believe that the Byzantine text was produced in the fourth century probably in an attempt to give the church one New Testament (there were a number of different Greek texts being used at the time). Other text families, on the other hand, appear to have more original readings and are quoted by the early church fathers, and are thus closer to the originals. So, the conclusions drawn from the application of textual criticism along with the ages of the manuscripts led them to believe that the most accurate Greek text is to be found by drawing from all the Greek text families, especially the Alexandrian family.(7)

Supporters of the Byzantine or Received Text responded that it was inappropriate to use naturalistic methods of study such as textual criticism on Scripture. They said that this amounts to elevating man over God in determining what the Bible says.(8) They also argued that the vast numbers of Byzantine manuscripts along with the centuries of history behind this text family should not be set aside on the basis of a few manuscripts discovered relatively recently. They insisted that the Spirit of God would not allow His true word to lie dormant so long while the church was being guided by inferior texts.

## **Textual Criticism**

As I noted above, those who argue for the Byzantine or Received Text say that it is improper to subject the Bible to the scrutiny of textual criticism. The Bible, being the inspired Word of God, is unique. One begins with it as inspired and then accepts what it says.

But those in the Westcott-Hort tradition note that we cannot simply shut our eyes to the fact that there are differences between the various Greek manuscripts, even those in the Byzantine family. Even those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture recognize that the original writings of the New Testament were inerrant, not the copies. It is our

responsibility to apply the most sound principles we know of to determine what the original manuscripts said. This is the aim of textual criticism.

So, how does textual criticism work? Differences between Greek manuscripts are called variants. There are several causes of variants. Some are accidental, such as misspelled words or repeated or reversed words. Some resulted from a scribe not hearing a dictation correctly. Also, deliberate changes seem to have been made to bring passages in different Gospels into harmony or to make a doctrinal point clearer.

What are some examples of differences between the Greek texts which show up in our English Bibles? One example is the Lord's Prayer as it is recorded in Matthew and in Luke. In the KJV the two versions are almost identical, while in the NIV the prayer in Luke 11 is significantly shorter than that in Matthew 6. Most scholars believe that, at some point in history, a scribe added to the text in Luke to make it agree more with Matthew.

The last half of Mark 16 is a lengthy section which is disputed. The KJV retains verses 9 through 20 while the NIV includes the passage with a note saying it is not found in the most reliable early manuscripts. Scholars who believe it should be excluded also note that the style and vocabulary are very different from the rest of Mark.(9)

To add one more, in the KJV, three verses in Mark 9 (44 ,46, and 48) are identical: "Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." The NIV puts verses 44 and 46 in footnotes and notes that *some* manuscripts include the phrase. Since each verse follows a reference to hell, it is very possible that a scribe simply repeated the warning to strengthen the message.

If all this makes you nervous about the accuracy of your Bible, it is important to note that textual criticism is used

on all documents for which the originals no longer exist. New Testament scholar J. Harold Greenlee noted that, with respect to the Bible, "No Christian doctrine . . . hangs upon a debatable text." (10) This conflict provides no fodder for critics of Christianity who might ask how we can know what the Bible really says. We can be confident that we have a highly accurate text, especially given the number of New Testament manuscripts available and the antiquity of some of them. (11) As one writer has said, "It is well to remember that the main body of the text and its general sense are left untouched . . . textual criticism engages in turning a magnifying glass upon some of the details." (12)

## **Other Issues in the Debate**

In addition to the question of textual criticism, questions regarding the number of manuscripts, the historical dominance of the Byzantine text, and the dates of the manuscripts still need to be considered.

First is the matter of the *number* of manuscripts. Between eighty and ninety percent of existing manuscripts are of the Byzantine family and are in remarkable agreement. This fact is not in dispute. King James supporters say that the few manuscripts to which Westcott and Hort gave preference cannot override the witness of the vast majority of manuscripts in existence which are of the Byzantine tradition. It is normal to expect that the oldest manuscript will have the most copies. (13) In response, those who follow Westcott and Hort point out that hundreds of copies could have been made from one defective text while a better text was not copied as often. The copying of New Testament texts was not as carefully monitored as the copying of the Old Testament text by Jewish scholars. As we have seen, errors were made and changes were deliberately introduced. Simply finding a lot of manuscripts which are in agreement is not enough. To illustrate their point, they ask whether one would rather have one real \$100

bill or five counterfeits.

A second issue is the *preservation* of the text through history. Supporters of the Received Text ask why God's Spirit would allow the church to be under the authority of a defective text for almost 1500 years. Textual critics respond that this argument exaggerates the issue. They do not consider the Byzantine text to be a "'bad' or heretical text; it presents the same Christian message as the critical [or Westcott-Hort] text." (14) Again, there are no doctrinal differences between the Greek texts. Members of the Byzantine family are used along with members of other text families to determine what the true reading of a passage should be. The major text families are neither absolutely corrupt nor absolutely perfect. Text critics must use all the available resources to determine what the original documents said.

Finally, the *dates* of the manuscripts are important in this debate. Textual critics point out that church fathers before the fourth century "unambiguously cited every text-type except the Byzantine." (15) If the Byzantine text-type comes directly from the original writings, one would expect unambiguous quotations of it from the beginning. They also point out that there are no Byzantine manuscripts older than the fourth century, whereas there *are* copies of other text families older than that.

In response to this, King James supporters note that the New Testament manuscripts began to be altered very soon after they were written. Eusebius, the ancient church historian, reported that heresies sprang up early after the turn of the second century, and proponents of these heresies sometimes altered Scripture to accord with their beliefs. (16) Thus, antiquity is not the crucial test. That there are no copies older than the fourth century can be explained by the fact that the material manuscripts were written on was fragile; it's reasonable to conclude that the early copies probably wore out through frequent handling.

# Summary and Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, those who support the King James/Received Text tradition emphasize the number of manuscripts, the church's history with the Byzantine text, and God's interest in preserving His Word, whereas those following Westcott and Hort say that the variants in the manuscripts – even between those in the Byzantine family – prove the need for the textual criticism of the New Testament. The results of their analysis along with the ages of the manuscripts leads them to believe that the Byzantine family is just one text family that can lead us back to the originals – or close to it – but it is not the one best text family.

So, which way should you go on this debate? If you are concerned about the issue, I suggest that you study it more. The texts cited in the notes will give you a place to start. If not, I would recommend using a version that is as close to the Greek text as possible while being understandable to you. But whichever version you choose, be very sure of your arguments before insisting that others use it, too. It seems to me that, with all the difficulties we face in our often hostile culture, we should not erect walls between Christians on the basis of Bible versions. We are not taking God's Word lightly here. We are simply calling for a more well-reasoned discussion and for the rule of love to govern the debate.

## Notes

1. *Marketplace*, Christian Booksellers Association, May, 1998.
2. An example is the pamphlet by J. J. Ray, *The Eye Opener* (Junction City, Oregon, 1953).
3. D.A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* 3d ed., (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1963), 185.

6. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 61-62.
7. To be more precise, while Westcott and Hort gave the greater weight to the Alexandrian text over the Byzantine, they gave even greater weight to the manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus which they considered to be "neutral texts." Later, sympathetic scholars grouped these two with the Alexandrian family. See Carson, 41.
8. Edward F. Hills, "The Magnificent Burgon," in *Which Bible?*, 5th ed., David Otis Fuller, ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 101-105.
9. Greenlee, 133.
10. *Ibid.*, 68.
11. In addition to the Greek manuscripts, also available for study are ancient lectionaries, various translations into other languages, and the writings of the early church fathers. See Greenlee, pp. 44-58.
12. *Ibid.*, 17.
13. Zane C. Hodges, "The Greek Text of the King James Version," in *Which Bible?*, 37.
14. Greenlee, 81.
15. Carson, 47.
16. Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 215-216. See also Benjamin G. Wilkinson, "Our Authorized Bible Vindicated," in *Which Bible?*, 190-193.

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