

The Deity of Christ

The belief that Jesus was and is God has always been a non-negotiable for Christianity. Don Closson explains that this belief is based on Jesus' own words as well as the teachings of the early church.



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

I recently received a letter from someone who argues that there is only one God, and that He is called many names and worshiped by many different people who hold to many different faiths. This kind of thinking about God is common today, but its popularity does not reduce the intellectual problems that may accompany it. For instance, does this notion of god include the god of the Aztecs who required child sacrifice? What about the warrior gods of Norse mythology: Odin, Thor, and Loki? How does the Mormon belief that we can all become Gods if we join their organization and conform to their system of good works fit into this theological framework? Even John Hick, an influential religious pluralist, believes that only some of the world's great religions qualify as having a valid view of God. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are valid, but Satanism and the religions of the Waco, Texas, variety are not. Belief that all religious systems worship one God raises difficult questions when we see how different groups portray God and seek to describe how we are to relate to Him.

The issue becomes even more acute when one religious tradition claims that God took on flesh becoming a man and walked on the earth. The Christian tradition has claimed for almost two thousand years that God did just that. The Gospel of John proclaims that, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John is, of course, talking about Jesus, and this claim presents an

interesting challenge for a religious pluralist. If what John and the rest of the New Testament writers claim about Jesus is true, then we literally have God in the flesh walking with and teaching a small band of disciples. If Jesus was God incarnate as He walked the earth, we have a first hand account of what God is like in the biblical record. Truth claims about God that counter those given in the Bible must then be discounted. In other words, if Jesus was God in the flesh during His time on earth, other religious texts or traditions are wrong when they teach about God or about knowing God in ways that contradict the biblical record.

In this essay we will consider the evidence for the deity of Christ. Christianity's truth claims are dependent on this central teaching, and once accepted, this claim reduces greatly the viability of religious pluralism, of treating all religious beliefs as equally true. For if God truly became flesh and spoke directly to His disciples about such things as sin, redemption, a final judgment, false religions and true worship, then we have the God of the universe expressing intolerance towards other religious claims- -specifically claims that discount the reality of sin and remove the need for redemption or the reality of a final judgment. Some might not agree with God's religious intolerance, but then again, disagreeing with God is what the Bible calls sin.

Rather than begin with a response to attacks on Christ's deity by modern critics like the Jesus Seminar or New Age gnostics, our discussion will begin with Jesus' own self-consciousness, in other words, what did Jesus say and think about himself. From there we will consider the teachings of the Apostles and the early church. My goal is to establish that from its inception, Christianity has taught and believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that this belief was the result of the very words that Jesus spoke concerning His own essence.

Christ's Self-Perception

As we begin to examine evidence that supports the claim that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh or God incarnate, a good starting point is Jesus' own self concept. It must first be admitted that Jesus never defines His place in the Trinity in theological language. However, He made many statements about himself that would be not only inappropriate, but blasphemous if He was not God in the flesh. It is important to remember that Jesus' life was not spent doing theology or thinking and writing about theological issues. Instead, His life was focused on relationships, first with His disciples, and then with the Jewish people. The purpose of these relationships was to engender in these people a belief in Jesus as their savior or Messiah, as their only source of salvation. Jesus told the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of His day, that they would die in their sins if they did not believe that He was who He claimed to be (John 8:24). And to one Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Millard Erickson, in his book *Christian Theology*, does a nice job of laying out evidence that Jesus considered himself equal in essence with God.(1) Unless He was God, it would have been highly inappropriate for Jesus to say, as He does in Matthew 13:41, that both the angels and the kingdom are His. Elsewhere, angels are called "the angels of God" (Luke 12:8 9; 15:10) and the phrase Kingdom of God is found throughout the Scriptures. But Jesus says, "The Son of man will send **His** angels, and they will gather out of **His** kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers" (Matt. 13:41).

When the paralytic in Mark 2:5 was lowered through the roof by his friends, Jesus' first response was to say that the man's sins were forgiven. The scribes knew the implications of this statement, for only God could forgive sin. Their remarks

clearly show that they understood Jesus to be exercising a divine privilege. Jesus had a wonderful opportunity to set the record straight here by denying that He had the authority to do what only God can do. Instead, His response only reinforces His claim to divinity. Jesus says, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?'" To confirm His authority to forgive sins, Jesus enabled the man to pick up his pallet and go home.

Two other areas that Jesus claimed authority over was the judging of sin and the observance of the Sabbath. Both were considered God's prerogative by the Jews. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "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." Jesus also claimed authority to change man's relationship to the Sabbath. Honoring the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Jews had been given strict instructions on how to observe it. In the book of Numbers, Moses is told by God to stone to death a man who collects wood on the Sabbath. However, in Matthew 12:8 Jesus says that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

These examples show that Jesus made claims and performed miracles that reveal a self awareness of His own divinity. In our next section, we will continue in this vein.

Christ's Self-Perception, Part 2

At this point in our discussion we will offer even more examples of Jesus' self knowledge of His essential equality with God.

A number of comments that Jesus made about His relationship with the Father would be unusual if Jesus did not consider himself equal in essence with God. In John 10:30 He says that to see Him is to see the Father. Later in John 14:7-9 He adds that to know Him is to know the Father. Jesus also claimed to

have existed prior to His incarnation on earth. In John 8:58 He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Some believe that the words used here by Jesus constitute His strongest claim to deity. According to the *Expositors Bible Commentary* this passage might more literally be translated, "Before Abraham came into being, I continuously existed." The Jews recognized the phrase "I am" as one referring to God because God used it (1) to describe himself when He commissioned Moses to demand the release of His people from Pharaoh (Exodus 3:14), and (2) to identify himself in the theistic proclamations in the second half of Isaiah. Jesus also declares that His work is coterminous with the Father. He proclaims that "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). The Jews hearing Jesus understood the nature of these claims. After His comment about pre-existing Abraham, they immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy because they understood that He had declared himself God.

In Jesus' trial He makes a clear declaration of who He is. The Jews argued before Pilate in John 19:7, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." Matthew 26 records that at Jesus' trial, the high priest tells Jesus, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus replies, "You have said it yourself, . . . But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." This would have been a wonderful opportunity for Jesus to save himself by clearing up any misconceptions concerning His relationship with the Father. Instead, He places himself in a position of equality and of unique power and authority. Again, the Jews understand what Jesus is saying. The high priest proclaims, "He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy." He calls for a vote of the council, and they

demand His death (Matt. 26:65-66).

Another indicator of how Jesus perceived himself is in His use of Old Testament Scripture and the way He made His own proclamations of truth. In a number of cases, Jesus began a sentence with "You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you. . . ." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28). Jesus was giving His words the same authority as the Scriptures. Even the prophets, when speaking for God, would begin their statements with: "The word of the Lord came to me," but Jesus begins with: "I say to you."

There are other indications of how Jesus saw himself. For example, Christ's claim to have authority over life itself in John 5:21 and 11:25, and His use of the self referential "Son of God" title point to unique power and authority and His essential equality with God.

The Apostles' Teaching

We will turn now to look at what Jesus' followers said of Him. The Gospel of John begins with a remarkable declaration of both Christ's deity and full humanity. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." Later in verse fourteen John remarks that this "Word" became flesh and walked among them and points to Jesus as this "Word" become flesh. What did John mean by this remarkable passage?

The first phrase might literally be translated: "When the beginning began, the Word was already there." In other words, the "Word" co-existed with God and predates time and creation. The second phrase "The Word was with God" indicates both equality and distinction of identity. A more literal translation might be "face to face with God," implying personality and relational coexistence. Some groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, make a great deal of the fact that the word "God" in the third phrase "The Word was God" lacks an

article. This, they argue, allows the noun God to be translated as an indefinite noun, perhaps referring to "a God" but not "the" almighty God. Actually, the lack of an article for the noun makes the case for the deity of the "Word" more clearly. The Greek phrase, *theos en ho logos* describes the nature of the "Word," not the nature of God. The article *ho* before the word *logos* shows that the sentence describes the nature of the Word; He is of the same nature and essence as the noun in the predicate; that is, the Word is divine. It is interesting to note that verses 6, 12, 13, and 18 of the same chapter refer unambiguously to God the Father and use an anarthrous noun, i.e., a noun without the article.(2) Yet strangely the Jehovah's Witnesses do not dispute the meaning of these passages.

The author of Hebrews writes plainly of Christ's deity. The first chapter states that, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." The passage also states that Jesus is not an angel nor is He just a priest. In Colossians 1:15 Paul adds that, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Although Paul clearly attributes godlike qualities to Jesus, the use of the word firstborn often causes confusion. The word can be a reference to priority in time or supremacy in rank. Since Jesus is described as the Creator of all things, the notion of supremacy seems more appropriate. Philippians 2:5-11 also talks of Jesus existing in the form of God. The Greek term used for form is *morphe*, denoting an outward manifestation of an inner essence.

Mention should also be made of the use by New Testament writers of the word *Lord* for Jesus. The same Greek word was

used in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, as the translated word for the Hebrew words Yahweh and Adonai, two special names given to God the Father. The Apostles meant to apply the highest sense of this term when referring to Jesus.

The Early Church

Thus far we have been examining the Christian claim of Christ's divinity, first considering Jesus' own self-concept and then the thoughts of those who wrote the New Testament. It is not within the scope of this essay to argue that the words attributed to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament are indeed His. Instead, we have argued that the words attributed to Jesus do claim an essential equality with God the Father. The traditional view of the Christian faith has been that God has revealed himself to us as three separate persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who shared a common essence.

Belief in Jesus' essential equality with God the Father was communicated by the Apostles to the church fathers to whom they handed the task of leading the church. Even though these early leaders often struggled with how to describe the notion of the Trinity with theological accuracy, they knew that their faith was in a person who was both man and God.

Clement of Rome is a good example of this faith. Writing to the church at Corinth Clement implies Jesus' equality with God the Father when he says "Have we not one God, and one Christ and one Spirit of grace poured upon us." Later, in his second letter, Clement tells his readers to "think of Jesus as of God, as the judge of the living and dead." Clement also wrote of Jesus as the preexistent Son of God; in other words, Christ existed before He took on human flesh. Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Christ's nature in his letter to the Ephesians, "There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God." A little later, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 140-202.) had to stress the humanity of Christ because of Gnostic heresy

that argued that Jesus was only a divine emanation. Irenaeus wrote, "There is therefore . . . one God the Father, and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who . . . gathered together all things in himself. But in every respect, too, he is man, the formation of God: and thus he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself" (*Against Heresies III*, 16). During the same time period, Tertullian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 155-240) wrote of Christ's nature that "what is born in the flesh is flesh and what is born in the Spirit is spirit. Flesh does not become spirit nor spirit flesh. Evidently they can (both) be in one (person). Of these Jesus is composed, of flesh as man and of spirit as God" (*Against Praxeas*, 14). Later he added, "We see His double state, not intermixed but conjoined in one person, Jesus, God and man" (*Against Praxeas*, 27).

By A.D. 325 the church had begun to systematize Christianity's response to various heretical views of Christ. The Nicene Creed stated, "We believe in God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being."(3)

The belief in Jesus Christ being of the same essence as God the Father began with Jesus himself, was taught to His Apostles, who in turn handed down this belief to the early church Fathers and apologists. Christ's deity is the foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 684-90.

2. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), pp. 28-29.

3. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 26.

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Worship

Jerry Solomon examines the history and purpose of worship, some contemporary hindrances to worship, and suggestions concerning renewal in corporate worship.

Definitions of Worship

During a 1954 interview A.W. Tozer, a great pastor and editor of the *Alliance Witness*, was asked what he thought would awaken the church from its complacency. This was his response: "In my opinion, the great single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple. The holy art of worship seems to have passed away like the Shekinah glory from the tabernacle. As a result, we are left to our own devices and forced to make up the lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the attention of the church people."⁽¹⁾ John MacArthur, a more contemporary preacher and writer, wrote this indictment in 1993: "In the past half decade, some of America's largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up the Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought

into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church.”(2)

These stinging analyses, whether we agree with them or not, remind us that the biblically based Christian is challenged to consider worship, along with all facets of life, in light of the culture in which he or she lives. Worship should be included in the total worldview of each individual Christian. It is a significant part of a believer’s life. With this in mind, we will reflect on the meaning and history of worship, hindrances to worship, and the content of worship. And we will offer our own analyses and suggestions.

As is true with many terms used among Christians, the word “worship” can become a cliché devoid of significant content if we don’t stop to consider its meaning. “Our English word means worthship,’ denoting the worthiness of an individual to receive special honor in accordance with that worth.”(3) The Hebrew and Greek terms found in the Bible “emphasize the act of prostration, the doing of obeisance.”(4) Warren Wiersbe offers a broad definition based upon these concepts. He writes, “Worship is the believer’s response of all that he is—mind, emotions, will, and body—to all that God is and says and does. This response has its mystical side in subjective experience, and its practical side in objective obedience to God’s revealed truth. It is a loving response that is balanced by the fear of the Lord, and it is a deepening response as the believer comes to know God better.”(5) A more narrow definition may sound like this: “Worship is pure adoration, the lifting up of the redeemed spirit toward God in contemplation of His holy perfection.”(6)

Do these definitions describe worship as you experience it with your gathered church and in your daily life? If so, you are blessed. If not, perhaps you need to evaluate the place of worship in your life. Perhaps you need to consider honestly if you have allowed yourself to become accustomed to traditions that have confused true worship. Perhaps you have approached

worship with the idea it applies only on Sunday mornings. Or maybe you have never stopped to consider the importance of worship.

The History of Worship

What comes to mind when you think of worship? Is it a formal occasion? Is it a joyous occasion? Does it contain certain rituals? Are you involved? Are you praising God? Are you learning? Are you hearing from God? Are you in contemplation? Are you singing? Are you praying? Are you alone, or with other people?

Perhaps you can answer some or all of these questions in the affirmative. And you probably can add other elements to what is contained in worship in your experience. But have you ever considered what worship may have looked like when the early church gathered? Were these elements included, or did it look very different? A very brief survey of the history of worship will help us begin to evaluate the purpose and content of worship today. Our ancestors had to wrestle with what worship entails long before our time. We can and should learn from them.

The worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the first Christians. As Robert Webber has written, "It must be remembered that the early Christians came into worship from a different perspective from modern Christians. We accept the Old because we have been informed by the New. But they accepted the New because they had been informed by the Old."⁽⁷⁾ The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Thus Jesus set the stage for the first acts of worship among the early believers by giving new meaning to the ancient ritual of the Passover meal. Acts 2:46 tells us that the earliest form of Christian worship was a meal—"breaking bread in their homes."⁽⁸⁾ Believers were remembering the Last Supper just as the Jews remembered the Passover. Eventually churches became too large

to accommodate these shared meals, so a single table with the elements of bread and wine became the focus. Thus “the central act of Christian worship in the history of the church has always been the Communion.”(9)

By the second century worship began to look more like what most of us include in our churches. Justin Martyr, an apologist and pastor, wrote of two major parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of lessons from the Old and New Testaments, a sermon, prayers, and hymns. The liturgy of the Eucharist included a kiss of peace; offering of bread, wine, and water; prayers and thanksgiving over the bread and wine; remembrance of Christ’s death, including the narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, and a command to continue in it; an Amen, said by all the people; Communion; then the reserved portions were taken by the deacons to those who were absent.(10)

It is unfortunate that by the late medieval period this twofold form of worship was overcome by pomp and ceremony that crowded out its meaning. But even the Reformers of the sixteenth century insisted on maintaining both Word and Sacrament. Their intent was to restore both elements to their primitive simplicity, and in the process the Scriptures were to be given an authoritative place.(11) Most evangelicals attempt to sustain the traditions of the Reformers. But what is the purpose of all this for the gathered church, and the individual believer?

The Purpose of Worship

Why should we worship God? Quite simply, we should worship Him because of who He is—God. In Revelation 4 and 5 we see descriptions that should provide impetus for our worship. He “is the only God, the highest, the Lord God, the heavenly King, the almighty God and Father, the Holy One.”(12) To put it succinctly, “in worship we simply tell God the truth about Himself.”(13) Each day of our lives we tell God the truth

about Himself, if we are thinking and living through the grid of a Christian worldview.

I have a good friend who is a physicist. Years ago his job included the consistent use of a sophisticated electron microscope. This impressive device allowed him to take pictures of the microscopic things he was studying. From these pictures he developed a wonderful slide presentation that served to remind us of the order and complexity that exists beyond what we can see with the naked eye. When we viewed these remarkable images, we responded in worship. Why? Because our worldview prompted us to contemplate the One who created such awesome things. We were filled with wonder. In our response we were telling God the truth about Himself. We were worshiping.

After his death friends of the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal, "found stitched into the lining of his doublet a scrap of parchment with a rough drawing of a flaming cross. Around that cross was the following poem,"(14) entitled "Fire":

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not of the philosophers and the learned.
Certitude. Joy. Certitude. Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world and of all outside of God.
The world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.
Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy.
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated from Thee for ever.(15)

In this unforgettable refrain we hear the heart of a man in worship. Pascal was responding to the very personal presence of God in his life by pouring out his heart. His contemplation led to worship. Jonathan Edwards, the great American philosopher- theologian of the eighteenth century, shared one of his experiences of worship in his *Personal Narrative*, which was published after his death.

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception . . . which continued near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.(16)

The full account of this encounter indicates that Edwards experienced worship during a time of contemplation and prayer. He sought to focus on God, and God responded in a dramatic way, just as was true for Pascal.

Such experiences don't have to be descriptive only of a few. We can apply at least two things from them. First, as with my physicist friend, our lives should include a sense of wonder. And wonder should lead to worship. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye."(17) Second, as with Pascal and Edwards, we need times of contemplation and prayer. Thoughts about God, and prayer to God can lead to a personal encounter with the One we worship.

Some Contemporary Hindrances to Worship

As of July 3, 1997, I will have known my wife for 30 years. During that time my love for her has become enriched through many experiences. If you were to ask me why I love her, I might respond by telling you what I receive from her. Or I might give you analyses of marriage fit for an essay. I might even attempt to persuade you to believe in marriage as I do. None of these responses would be wrong, but they would be incomplete, and they wouldn't focus on the primary subject: my wife, the object of my love. The lover would have hindered true praise of the loved one.

The same can be said frequently of us as we consider worship in our lives. If we aren't careful, we can hinder worship, both individually and corporately, by emphasizing things that

may be good, but don't give us a complete picture of what worship entails. There are at least three words that can describe these hindrances: pragmatism, intellectualism, and evangelism.

Pragmatism as a hindrance to worship. First, pragmatism has led many to find ways of getting what they want, instead of what they need. This means the worship "customer" is sovereign. "The idea is a basic selling principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they don't want."(18) Many churches are growing numerically through such strategies, but is worship taking place? It's my conviction that the answer is "No." People may be coming, but numbers are not the issue. Worship is done among regenerated Christians who are concentrating on who God is, not on what we want. Paradoxically, what we truly want, communion with God, takes place when we pursue what we truly need.

Intellectualism as a hindrance to worship. Second, intellectualism is not a substitute for worship. Coming from one who believes strongly in the importance of intellect in the Christian life, this may be surprising. But I have come to realize that worship is not a glorified Bible study. This does not mean that the preaching of Scripture is not a key ingredient of worship, but the one who is preaching is responsible to share in light of worship. As Warren Wiersbe has written, "There is much more to preaching than passing along religious information. It must reveal, not mere facts about God, but the Person of God Himself."(19) Wiersbe continues: "When preaching is an act of worship, the outline is to the text what a prism is to a shaft of sunlight: it breaks it up so that its beauty and wonder are clearly seen."(20) Such comments also apply to our private times of Bible study. Our minds are to be used in study, but what is studied includes worship of the One who has communicated with us.

Evangelism as a hindrance to worship. Third, evangelism is not the ultimate reason for worship. Non-believers who are in attendance at a time of worship certainly can be touched by the Spirit, but worship implies the believer's response to God. A non-believer cannot worship the true and living God. Thus an "altar call" should not be the primary focus. Instead, the church should be called to focus on the One who has called them into His family. Then they take what they have heard, seen, and experienced into the surrounding world.

Let's reconsider such hindrances as we seek to worship God, who will be glorified in the process.

The Content of Worship

"I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). "I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Thy wonders. I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High" (Ps. 9:1-2). "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1). "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6).

What do these Scriptures have in common? They are statements of worship; they are inspired statements from men to God. And for the moment it's our hope that they serve to stimulate us to contemplate the content of worship.

One of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship is found in Jesus' well-known encounter with the

Samaritan woman (John 4:23 24). Jesus told her:

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Earlier (vs. 21) Jesus had told the woman that the place of worship was unimportant. One doesn't worship just on a particular mountain, in Jerusalem, or any other place. We are free to worship God anywhere. So then He told her what is important.

First, the spirit of worship is important. We are to render "such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act." (21) Whether we are in a time of private praise and adoration, or gathered with the church in corporate proclamation, we are to respond to who God is from the spirit, from the whole of our innermost being. Second, we are to do "this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in his Word." (22) The concept of responding to God in spirit can give rise to confusing individual expressions if those expressions are not guided by Scripture. There must be balance between spirit and truth. One without the other is not complete. "As some see it, a humble, spiritual attitude means little. According to others, truth or doctrinal soundness is of no importance. Both are one-sided, unbalanced, and therefore wrong. Genuine worshipers worship in spirit and truth." (23)

These comments began with quotes from biblical writers who wrote their statements of worship. It's striking to note how those statements contain not only the truth of God, but the truth about God. Truth permeates their worship. But it's also striking to note the spirit with which those expressions were shared. They are from the heart. They penetrate our lives; they are alive with true worship. As we read and hear such expressions they should encourage us to worship God in spirit

and truth. And thus the content of our worship will be pleasing to Him.

Concluding Suggestions Concerning Corporate Worship Renewal

We have discussed several aspects of worship: its definition, history, purpose, hindrances, and content. To conclude we will focus on five suggestions that can be applied to corporate worship in the contemporary church.

First, consider how time is allotted when the church gathers for worship. As churches grow they tend to break into various times of worship. Thus the available time for worship is decreased. One group needs to be released from the worship center in time for another to enter. As a result, often there is a feeling of being rushed. And this feeling of being rushed is exacerbated because so much of the available time is spent with things that may be good, but are not conducive to worship. Announcements may concern good things, for example, but they take time from the true intent of the gathered church.

Second, consider how much attention is given to worship by the leadership of the church. The pastor, staff, and other leadership should demonstrate that worship has a very high priority. There should not be a question of how much energy has been given to preparation for worship on the part of the leadership.

Third, consider who is the leader of worship and why. It is my conviction that the pastor should be the one who calls the body to worship and leads it by example. Much is communicated to the congregation when the primary earthly leader implores the people to give their undivided attention to the reason for their gathering. In addition, much is communicated when the pastor is involved in worship beyond just the delivery of a sermon, no matter how good it may be. Having served on a

church staff for many years, I know some of the time implications of this suggestion. But I believe if the church makes worship the priority, the pastor should provide the leadership for it. Fourth, consider what has priority in worship. Quite simply, the question is whether or not God has priority. Or do other things tend to crowd the allotted time and distract from the true intention? For example, it may be good to let a visiting relative of a church member sing a solo, but has someone talked with this person in order to discuss the reason for any solos within the time of worship? Remember, worship is to be God-centered, not man-centered.

Fifth, consider the place of style versus substance in worship. It appears to me that the "style" of worship is not the issue as much as the substance. In other words, if the people are called to worship God with integrity and concentration on Him, the style is secondary. This applies regardless of whether the style is liturgical/traditional, contemporary, or something in between. But if the style overshadows substance, true worship may be thwarted. It is a wise church that brings both style and substance together in a manner that pleases God.

These five suggestions and the thoughts that have preceded them have been offered with the hope that you have been stimulated to consider the importance of worship in your life. The worshiping Christian in a worshiping church is a person who is continually empowered to impact the world for the glory of God. May you be among those empowered people!

Notes

1. A.W. Tozer, *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Zondervan, 1957), 87-88.
2. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway, 1993), xvii-xviii.
3. Everett F. Harrison, "Worship," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker,

1960), 560.

4. Ibid.

5. Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, 1986), 27.

6. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 561.

7. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 84.

8. Ibid., 83.

9. Ibid., 86.

10. Ibid., 80-81.

11. Ibid., 87-88.

12. Ibid., 85.

13. Ibid.

14. Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993),

15. Blaise Pascal, *Fire*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13.

16. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13-14.

17. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard, 1936), 713.

18. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 49.

19. Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 123.

20. Ibid., 124.

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The Christian Canon

Don Closson provides a summary of the process through which the books of the New Testament were selected by the early church fathers and brought down to modern times. Understanding how the books of the Bible were determined

according to important criteria of authorship, wide acceptance and relevance, help give us an appreciation for the wonder of God's word to us.

The Early Church Fathers

Some Christians are unnerved by the fact that nowhere does God itemize the sixty-six books that are to be included in the Bible. Many believers have at best a vague notion of how the church arrived at what we call the Canon of Scripture. Even after becoming more aware, some believers are uncomfortable with the process by which the New Testament Canon was determined. For many, it was what appears to be a haphazard process that took far too long.

Furthermore, whether talking with a Jehovah's Witness, a liberal theologian, or a New Ager, Christians are very likely to run into questions concerning the extent, adequacy, and accuracy of the Bible as God's revealed Word.

In this essay, therefore, we will consider the development of the doctrine of the Scriptures in the Church Age. Just how did the church decide on the books for inclusion in the New Testament? This discussion will include both how the Canon was established and the various ways theologians have viewed the Bible since the Canon was established.

The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been disciples of the Apostle John. Doctrinal authority during this period rested on two sources, the Old Testament (O.T.) and the notion of Apostolic succession, being able to trace a direct association to one of the Apostles and thus to Christ. Although the New Testament (N.T.) Canon was written, it was not yet seen as a separate body of books equivalent to the O.T. Six church leaders are commonly referred to: Barnabas,

Hermas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 37). Although these men lacked the technical sophistication of today's theologians, their correspondence confirmed the teachings of the Apostles and provides a doctrinal link to the N.T. Canon itself. Christianity was as yet a fairly small movement. These Church Fathers, often elders and bishops in the early Church, were consumed by the practical aspects of Christian life among the new converts. Therefore, when Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the early church did not have a technical theology of the Trinity, they are basically right. There had been neither time nor necessity to focus on the issue. On the other hand these men clearly believed that Jesus was God as was the Holy Spirit, but they had yet to clarify in writing the problems that might occur when attempting to explain this truth.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt about the authority of the O.T., often prefacing their quotes with "For thus saith God" and other notations. As a result they tended to be rather moralistic and even legalistic on some issues. Because the N.T. Canon was not yet settled, they respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. The books of Hermas, Barnabas, Didache, and 1 and 2 Clement were all regarded highly (Hannah, *Lecture Notes for the History of Doctrine*, 2.2). As Berkhof writes concerning these early Church leaders, "For them Christianity was not in the first place a knowledge to be acquired, but the principle of a new obedience to God" (Berkhof, *History of the Christian Church*, 39).

Although these early Church Fathers may seem rather ill-prepared to hand down all the subtle implications of the Christian faith to the coming generations, they form a doctrinal link to the Apostles (and thus to our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as a witness to the growing commitment to the Canon of Scripture that would become the N.T. As Clement of Rome said in first century, "Look carefully into the

Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit” (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 11).

The Apologists

After the early Church Fathers comes the era of the Apologists and Theologians, roughly including the second, third, and fourth centuries. It is during this period that the Church takes the initial steps toward establishing a “rule of faith” or Canon.

During this period both internal and external forces caused the church to begin to systematize both its doctrines and its view of revelation. Much of the systemization came about as a defense against the heresies that challenged the faith of the Apostles. Ebionitism humanized Jesus and rejected the writings of Paul, resulting in a more Jewish than Christian faith. Gnosticism attempted to blend oriental theosophy, Hellenistic philosophy, and Christianity into a new religion that saw the physical creation as evil and Christ as a celestial being with secret knowledge to teach us. It often portrayed the God of the O.T. as inferior to the God of the N.T. Marcion and his movement also separated the God of the Old and New Testaments, accepting Paul and Luke as the only writers who really understood the Gospel of Christ (Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 54). Montanus, responding to the gnostics, ended up claiming that he and two others were new prophets offering the highest and most accurate revelation from God. Although they were basically orthodox, they exalted martyrdom and a legalistic asceticism that led to their rejection by the Church.

Although the term *canon* was not used in reference to the N.T. texts until the fourth century by Athanasius, there were earlier attempts to list the acceptable books. The Muratorian Canon listed all the books of the Bible except for 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, and James around A.D. 180 (Hannah,

Notes, 2.5). Irenaeus, as bishop of Lyon, mentions all of the books except Jude, 2 Peter, James, Philemon, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. The Syriac Version of the Canon, from the third century, leaves out Revelation.

It should be noted that although these early Church leaders differed on which books should be included in the Canon, they were quite sure that the books were inspired by God. Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, argues that, "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God [Christ] and His Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 12). By the fourth century many books previously held in high regard began to disappear from use and the apocryphal writings were seen as less than inspired.

It was during the fourth century that concentrated attempts were made both in the East and the West to establish the authoritative collection of the Canon. In 365, Athanasius of Alexandria listed the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament which he regarded as the "only source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the religion of the Gospel" (Hannah, *Notes*, 2.6). While Athanasius stands out in the Eastern Church, Jerome is his counterpart in the West. Jerome wrote a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola in 394 listing just 39 O.T. books and our current 27 N.T. ones. It was in 382 that Bishop Damasus had Jerome work on a Latin text to standardize the Scripture. The resulting Vulgate was used throughout the Christian world. The Synods of Carthage in 397 and 418 both confirmed our current twenty-seven books of the NT.

The criteria used for determining the canonicity of the books included the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in general, and specifically Apostolic origin or sanction, usage by the Church, intrinsic content, spiritual and moral effect, and the attitude of the early church.

The Medieval and Reformation Church

In the fourth century Augustine voiced his belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the N.T. text, as did Justin Martyr in the second. This meant that every part of the Scriptures, down to the individual word, was chosen by God to be written by the human writers. But still, the issue of what should be included in the Canon was not entirely settled. Augustine included the Book of Wisdom as part of the Canon and held that the Septuagint or Greek text of the O.T. was inspired, not the Hebrew original. The Church Fathers were sure that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were still not in agreement as to which texts should be included.

As late as the seventh and eighth centuries there were church leaders who added to or subtracted from the list of texts. Gregory the Great added Tobias and Wisdom and mentioned 15 Pauline epistles, not 14. John of Damascus, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete systematic theology, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitution and 1 and 2 Clement to the N.T. One historian notes that "things were no further advanced at the end of the fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.3). This same historian notes that although we would be horrified at such a state today, the Catholicism of the day rested far more on ecclesiastical authority and tradition than on an authoritative Canon. Thus Roman Catholicism did not find the issue to be a critical one.

The issue of canonical authority finally is addressed within the bigger battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. In 1545 the Council of Trent was called as a response to the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church. As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself. It proposed that all the books found in Jerome's Vulgate were of equal canonical value (even though Jerome himself separated the Apocrypha from the rest) and that

the Vulgate would become the official text of the Church. The council then established the Scriptures as equivalent to the authority of tradition.

The reformers were also forced to face the Canon issue. Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Luther was troubled by four books, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, and though he placed them in a secondary position relative to the rest, he did not exclude them. John Calvin also argued for the witness of the Spirit (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.7). In other words, it is God Himself, via the Holy Spirit who assures the transmission of the text down through the ages, not the human efforts of the Catholic Church or any other group. Calvin rests the authority of the Scripture on the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote in his *Institutes*,

Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.

He goes on to say, "We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate."

Modern Views

Although the early church, up until the Reformation, was not yet united as to which books belonged in the Canon, they were certain that the books were inspired by God and contained the Gospel message that He desired to communicate to a fallen world. After the Reformation, the books of the Canon were widely agreed upon, but now the question was, Were they inspired? Were they God breathed as Paul declared in 2 Timothy 3:16?

What led to this new controversy? A great change began to occur in the way that learned men and women thought about the nature of the universe, God, and man's relationship to both. Thinking in the post-Reformation world began to shift from a Christian theistic worldview to a pantheistic or naturalistic one. As men like Galileo and Francis Bacon began to lay the foundation for modern science, their successes led others to apply their empirical methodology to answering philosophical and theological questions.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), although a believer, began his search for knowledge from a position of doubt, assuming only that he exists because he is able to ask the question. Although he ends up affirming God, he is able to do this only by assuming God's existence, not via rational discovery (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.2). Others that followed built upon his system and came to different conclusions. Spinoza (1633-77) arrived at pantheism, a belief that all is god, and Leibnitz (1646-1716) concluded that it is impossible to acquire religious knowledge from a study of history.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) took another step away from the notion of revealed truth. He attempted to build a philosophy using only reason and sense perception; he rejected the idea that God might have imprinted the human mind with knowledge of Himself. Another big step was taken by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Attempting to protect Christian thinking from the

attacks of science and reason, he separated knowledge of God or spirit and knowledge of the phenomenal world. The first was unknowable, the second was knowable. Christianity was reduced to a set of morals, the source of which was unknowable by humanity.

The 1800s brought with it the fruit of Kant's separation of truth from theology. German theologians built upon Kant's foundation resulting in man becoming the source of meaning and God fading into obscurity. Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) replaced revelation with religious feeling, and salvation by grace with self-analysis. The Scriptures have authority over us only if we have a religious feeling about them first. The faith that leads to this religious feeling may come from a source completely independent of the Scriptures.

David Strauss (1808-74) completely breaks from the earlier high view of Scripture. He affirms a naturalistic worldview by denying the reality of a supernatural dimension. In his book, *Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus"), he completely denies any supernatural events traditionally associated with Jesus and His apostles, and calls the Resurrection of Christ "nothing other than a myth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.5). Strauss goes on to claim that if Jesus had really spoken of Himself as the N.T. records, He must have been out of His mind. In the end, Strauss argues that the story we have of Christ is a fabrication constructed by the disciples who added to the life of Christ what they needed to in order for Him to become the Messiah. Strauss's work would be the foundation for numerous attacks on the accuracy and authenticity of the N.T. writers, and of the ongoing attempt, even today, to demythologize the text and find the so-called "real Jesus of history."

What Now?

As one reviews the unfolding story of how the Canon of Christian Scriptures has been formed and then interpreted, we

can get a fairly accurate picture of the changes that have taken place in the thinking of Western civilization. Two thousand years ago men walked with Christ and experienced His deity first hand. God, through the Holy Spirit, led many of these men to compose an inspired account of their experiences which revealed to the following generations what God had done to save a fallen world. This text along with the notion of Apostolic succession was accepted as authoritative by the emerging Christian population, and would eventually come to dominate much of Western thought. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation rejected the role of tradition, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, when it had begun to supersede the authority of Scripture. Later, the Enlightenment began the process of removing the possibility of revelation by elevating man's reason and limiting our knowledge to what science could acquire. This was the birth of Modernism, attempting to answer all the questions of life without God.

The wars and horrors of the twentieth century have crushed many thinkers' trust in mankind's ability to implement a neutral, detached scientific mind to our problems and its ability to determine truth. As a result, many have rejected modernism and the scientific mind and have embraced a postmodernist position which denies anyone's ability to be a neutral collector of truth, which might be true for everyone, everywhere. This has left us with individual experience and personal truth. Which really means that truth no longer exists. What does this mean for the theologian who has accepted the conclusions of postmodern thinking? One theologian writes, "At the present, however, there is no general agreement even as to what theology is, much less how to get on with the task of systematics. . . . We are, for the most part, uncertain even as to what the options are" (Robert H. King, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 1-2).

This same theologian argues that Christian theology can no

longer rest upon metaphysics or history. In other words, neither man's attempt to explain the causes or nature of reality nor the historical record of any texts, including the Bible can give us a sure foundation for doing theology. We have the remarkable situation of modern theologians attempting to do theology without any knowledge of God and His dealings with His creation. It is not surprising that modern theologians are seeing Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhism, along with other Eastern traditions, as possibilities for integration with Christian thought or at least Christian ethics. These traditions are not rooted in historical events and often deny any basis in rational thinking, even to the point of questioning the reality of the self (King, *Christian Theology*, 27).

Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation. History has shown us that it rarely takes more than a generation for this kind of religion to lose its significance within a culture. How then do we know that Christianity is true? William Lane Craig, in his book *Reasonable Faith*, makes an important point. As believers, we know that the Scriptures are inspired, and that the Gospel message is true, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent. We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools. However, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that softens hearts and calls men and women to believe in the God of the Bible.

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- [There Is No Compelling Reason to Accept the Books of the Bible as Special](#)
 - [How Did the Church Recognize Which Books Were Inspired by God?](#)

The Jesus Seminar

Jimmy Williams provides analysis of the Jesus Seminar findings in light of five critical areas: Identify purpose of the Jesus Fellows, Presuppositions, Canonical Gospels, Chronology and Christological differences.

Introduction

- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all.”*
- *“Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised from the dead.”*
- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was born of a virgin.”*
- *“Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired.”*

So says Robert W. Funk, Architect and Founder of the Jesus Seminar, in a Keynote Address to the Jesus Seminar Fellows in the spring of 1994.(1) The Jesus Seminar has been receiving

extensive coverage lately in such periodicals as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as on network television.

Biographical

The Jesus Seminar Fellows

The Jesus Seminar is a group of New Testament scholars who have been meeting periodically since 1985. The initial two hundred has now dwindled to about seventy-four active members. They initially focused on the sayings of Jesus within the four Gospels to determine the probability of His actually having said the things attributed to Him in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each scholar offered his/her opinion on each "Jesus" statement by voting with different colored beads:

- *Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.*
- *Pink: Jesus probably or might have said something like this.*
- *Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to His own.*
- *Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition.*

Their voting conclusions: Over 80% of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, by voting consensus, either gray or black. This means that only 20% of Jesus' statements are likely to have been spoken by Him. The other 80% are most assuredly, they say, unlikely to have ever been uttered by Jesus.

Their conclusions were published in 1993 in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The primary author of the book, Robert W. Funk, also the Founder and Chair of the Jesus Seminar, crafted the results of

their deliberations in a slick, color-coded format with charts, graphics, appendices, and copious footnotes. (The Gospel of Thomas is to be included with the traditional four gospels, they say.)

Who are these scholars, and what are their credentials? Robert W. Funk, former professor of the New Testament at the University of Montana is the most prominent leader. He is joined by two other major contributors, John Dominic Crossan, of DePaul University, Chicago, who has authored several books including *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, *The Essential Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and Marcus Borg of Oregon State University, also the author of several books including: *Jesus: A New Vision* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*.

Of the remaining active participants, only fourteen are well-known scholars in New Testament studies. Another twenty are recognizable within the narrow confines of the discipline, but they are not widely published beyond a few journal articles or dissertations. The remaining forty are virtually unknowns, and most of them are either at Harvard, Vanderbilt, or Claremont College, three universities widely considered among the most liberal in the field.

The public, exposed by the mass of publicity and attention given to the Jesus Seminar by the media has been inclined to assume that the theories of these scholars represent the "cutting edge," the mainstream of current New Testament thought. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nearly all of these scholars are American. European scholarship is nearly non-existent and, that being the case, it would be inaccurate, if not deceiving for the Jesus Seminar participants to present themselves, their work, and their conclusions as a broad, representative consensus of worldwide New Testament scholarship.

While the media and the general public may tend to be gullible and naive about the authority and findings of the Jesus Seminar, Christians need not be intimidated.

Philosophical

Why is this movement important? Should Christians be concerned with this? Haven't the gospel traditions had their skeptics and critics for centuries? What is different about the Jesus Seminar?

Scholars since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century have questioned such things as the miracles, the prophecies, and the extraordinary claims of Christ in the Gospels.

Beginning in Germany, a separation began to occur between the "Jesus of History" and the "Christ of Faith"; that is, it came to be popularly believed that a man named Jesus really lived, but that fantastic myths grew up around Him and about His powers and claims, and thus He became for many the "Christ of Faith" in story, symbol, and worship. Scholars promoting this separation conclude that biblical history is not what is important; but rather, one's personal experience, one's search for meaning and timeless truths. Those are of primary importance to an individual.

The Jesus Seminar stands in this tradition. But what is most significant about their work is that it has widened the circle of awareness (i.e., the general public) to New Testament studies and criticism, and a focus upon issues which up until now have been primarily restricted to academic discussions among New Testament scholars.

This group has brought into question the very authenticity and validity of the gospels which lie at the center of Christianity's credibility. If what the Jesus Seminar espouses is historically accurate, the sooner the naive Christian community can be educated to these facts the better, according

to these scholars.

A major presupposition of the Jesus Seminar, therefore, is philosophical naturalistic worldview which categorically denies the supernatural. Therefore they say one must be wary of the following in the Gospels:

- **Prophetic statements.** *Predictions by Jesus of such things as the destruction of the Temple, or of Jerusalem, or His own resurrection are later literary additions or interpolations. How do we know this? Because no one can predict the future. So they MUST have been added later by zealous followers.*
- **Miracles.** *Since miracles are not possible, every recorded miracle in the Gospels must be a later elaboration by an admiring disciple or follower, or must be explained on the basis of some physical or natural cause (i.e., the Feeding of the 5,000: Jesus gave the signal, and all those present reached beneath their cloaks, pulled out their own “sack lunches,” and ate together!).*
- **Claims of Jesus.** *Christ claimed to be God, Savior, Messiah, Judge, Forgiver of sin, sacrificial Lamb of God, etc. All of these, say the Jesus Fellows, are the later work of His devoted followers. The historical Jesus never claimed these things for Himself, as Funk infers in his above-mentioned statements. Reality isn't like this. It couldn't be true.*

Therefore the Jesus Fellows assert that the Gospels could not have been written by eyewitnesses in the mid-first century. On the basis of this philosophical presupposition, the Jesus Seminar considers itself personally and collectively free to select or discard any statement of the Gospels which is philosophically repugnant.

There is nothing new about this approach in New Testament scholarship. Thomas Jefferson, a great American patriot and president did the same thing in the late 1700s with almost

identical results. He admired Jesus as a moral man, but like the Jesus Fellows, he assumed all supernatural and extraordinary elements in the Gospels were unreliable and could not be true. With scissors and paste, Jefferson cut out of the Gospels any and everything which contravened the laws of nature and his own reason.

When he had finished his project, only 82 columns of the four Gospels out of his King James Bible remained from an original 700. The other nine-tenths lay on the cutting room floor. Jefferson entitled his creation *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, and his book ended with the words, "There laid they Jesus . . . and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher and departed."(2)

Jefferson and the Jesus Fellows, like all skeptics, prefer their own reason and biases over the possibility that the Gospels are accurate in what they say about miracles, prophecy, and the claims of Christ. They are like the man who visited the psychiatrist and informed him of a grave problem: "I think I'm dead!" The psychiatrist said, "That is a serious problem. May I ask you a question? Do you believe that dead men bleed?" The man quickly answered, "Of course not. Dead men don't bleed." The psychiatrist reached forward, and taking a hat pin, he pricked the man's finger. The man looked down at his bleeding finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

Canonical

The Jesus Fellows, on the basis of their naturalistic bias, conclude that at least the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) could not have been written at the time tradition and many New Testament scholars assume they were. The "Priority of Mark" as the earliest gospel written has strong (but not universal) support. And yet Mark 13 records Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, something that did not actually occur until A.D. 70.

Since the Jesus Fellows do not believe prophecy is possible, they judge Mark, the “earliest” of the Gospels, to have been written after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. If Mark was written in the early 70s, still later dates are then required for Matthew and Luke, to say nothing of the Book of Acts which must follow them with an even later date.

Now, this gives the Jesus Scholars a “window” of about 40 years from the time of Jesus’ death (a A.D. 32.) to the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) to look for earlier sources devoid of miracles and extraordinary claims. They think they have found two such primary sources which fit their assumptions. The first of these is the “Q” source, or “Quelle.”

Synoptics/Quelle

It has long been observed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have had some kind of symbiotic relationship, as if they were aware of one another, or used the same sources, or some of the same sources. The prevailing theory is that Mark (the shortest of the three) was written first, and was later substantially incorporated into both Matthew and Luke. There is a high, but not total agreement, in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke where the two reflect the book of Mark.

But Matthew and Luke have additional material, some 250 verses (i.e., the Christmas stories, greater elaboration on the resurrection events, etc.). And there are some verses which are common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Thus many scholars conclude there was some other document or source available to Matthew and Luke which explains why they contain these additional 250 verses along with the corpus of Mark. The scholars have designated this material as “Q,” or “Quelle,” which is the German word for “Source.” Outside of the Synoptic gospels, there is no written documentary evidence to substantiate Quelle.

A number of New Testament scholars thus claim that Quelle must have been an early, written document which preceded the writing of the Synoptic gospels and was incorporated into them. And they claim that in these 250 verses we only find a very "normal, human" Jesus who is more likely to have been the historical man.

The Gospel of Thomas

The second source given high priority and preference by the Jesus Seminar Fellows is the Gospel of Thomas. In fact, they value it so highly they have placed it alongside the four traditional ones, giving it equal, if not superior, value and historical authenticity.

A complete copy of The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the 1940s at an Egyptian site called Nag Hammadi, where archaeologists found an entire library of ancient texts including the Gospel of Thomas. It was dated around A.D. 400 and written in Coptic, the language of the ancient Egyptian church. This astonishing cache consisted of early Christian and Gnostic texts.

This Gospel of Thomas has now been studied for forty years, and the overwhelming conclusion of scholars worldwide has been that the document carries many of the identifying marks of a Gnostic literary genre, from a sect prominent in Egypt and the Nile Valley during the second, third, and fourth centuries.

It has been almost universally assumed that the parallels in Thomas to the New Testament Gospels and epistles were copied or paraphrased (not the reverse, as the Jesus Fellows claim) to suit Gnostic purposes, teachings which were opposed to all ideas about a supernatural God in the flesh Who could perform miracles, forgive sin, and rise from the dead. The Jesus Seminar Scholars have fit Thomas nicely together with "Q" to frame an historical portrait of Jesus based primarily upon these two sources.

The Jesus Scholars have declared that the Gospel of Thomas and the Q Source were written within the forty years between Jesus' death and the fall of Jerusalem, pushing forward the writing of the four canonical gospels (a necessity on their part to uphold their theory) to very late in the first century.

Chronological

Apart from completely ignoring Paul's epistles which were written between A.D. 45 and his martyrdom at the hands of Nero in A.D. 68, the Jesus Fellows have a critical problem in fitting their theory into first century chronology.

In the last chapter of the Book of Acts (28), Luke leaves us with the impression that Paul is in Rome, and still alive. Tradition tells us he died in A.D. 68. In Acts, Luke shows keen awareness of people, places and contemporary events, both within and without the church. And he records the martyrdoms of both Stephen and James. It is highly unlikely, if the deaths of Paul and Peter and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) had already occurred when Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, that he would have failed to record these most important events.

New Testament scholars are in strong agreement that whoever wrote Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke two volumes by one author, both addressed to a man named "Theophilus." And since Luke is supposed to have incorporated Mark and the Q Source material into the writing of his own Gospel, and Acts was written after Luke, but before Paul's death (A.D. 68) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), then Mark and Quelle must have been written by the mid 60s. The same difficulty in Luke exists with Mark, who is said to have written his gospel with Peter as his source, Peter having been martyred in Rome about the same time as Paul.

It is highly unlikely that these two obscure sources, Quelle

and the Gospel of Thomas, could have been circulating throughout the Christian community and having such impact that they overshadowed what Paul was at the very same time saying about Jesus in all of his epistles.

Real church history is not kind to the Jesus Fellows at this point. The church did not first flourish in the Nile Valley and spread elsewhere. The clear pattern of expansion from both biblical and the earliest patristic writings is from Jerusalem to Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome. Ironically, the earliest of the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 30 to ca. A.D. 100) writes from Rome at the end of the first century an epistle to the Corinthians (1 Clement) which is considered to be the oldest extant letter after the writings of the Apostles. It had such stature in the early church that it was initially considered by some to be a part of the Canon. All the other early church fathers (2nd century) are scattered around in cities within the areas mentioned above, with the exception of Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150 to c. A.D. 215) who reflects some Gnostic ideas in his teachings.

The more traditional and accepted chronology for the documents under consideration is as follows:

Dating/chronology of First Century Authorship

(All dates are A.D.)

Uncontested:

End of First Century: 100

Fall of Jerusalem: 70

Martyrdom of Paul and Peter: 68

Epistles of Paul: 45-68

Some Oral Tradition: 32-70

Crucifixion of Jesus: 32

Traditional:(3)

Clement of Rome: 96

Revelation (John): 96

Epistles of John: 90-94
Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 66-68
Matthew & Luke: 64-66
Gospel of Mark: 64-65

Jesus Seminar:(4)

Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 80-100
Gospel of Luke: 80-100
Gospel of Matthew: 80-90
Gospel of Mark: 70-80
Gospel of Thomas: 70-100

In comparing the two chronologies, it appears there simply is not enough time for the simple Jesus of history to evolve into the Christ of faith. Myths and legends need time to develop. There is none available in the first century to accommodate the Jesus Seminar's theory.

Christological

On the basis of the Gospel of Thomas and Quelle, the Jesus Fellows believe the historical Jesus was simply a sage, a spinner of one-liners, a teller of parables, an effective preacher. This is what He was historically according to these scholars. The "high Christology" (supernatural phenomena, the messianic claims, the miracles, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection) all came as a result of a persecuted church community which needed a more powerful God for encouragement and worship. His suffering, ardent followers are responsible for these embellishments which created the "Christ of Faith." The real Jesus was a winsome, bright, articulate peasant, sort of like Will Rogers.

Various other portraits of Jesus have proliferated among the Jesus Fellows, suggesting that he was a religious genius, a social revolutionary, an eschatological prophet. He was all of

these things, we would say, but offer that He was something more.

The Jesus Seminar assumes a “low christology” (Jesus as a peasant sage) preceded the “high christology” created later by the church. Is there anything that would suggest otherwise?

The Epistles of Paul

The Apostle Paul conducted his church-planting ministry between approximately 40 to the time of his death, A.D. 68. It was also during this time that he wrote all of his epistles. While some New Testament scholars question the authenticity of Paul’s authorship of a number of these epistles, virtually all, even the most liberal, will accept Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians as genuinely Pauline.

What kind of “Christology” do we find in these epistles? A high christology. The Jesus Seminar is asking us to believe that at the very same time the Gospel of Thomas and the Q source were alleged to have been written portraying Jesus as a wise, peasant sage, Paul was planting churches across the Mediterranean world and ascribing to Jesus the same high christology found later in the four gospels!

The Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 clearly indicates that Paul was aware of and connected to Jerusalem and its church leadership (Peter and James). After the Council Paul and Barnabas were given the express task of taking and distributing to the churches a written document of the Council’s instructions about how Gentiles were to be incorporated into the church.

The Jesus Seminar simply chooses to ignore this mass of clear, Pauline evidence almost universally accepted by New Testament scholars. The notion that a high christology (the Gospels and the epistles) evolved from a low christology (the Gospel of Thomas, Quelle) is unsupportable.

Jesus the Sage

If we accept the Jesus Seminar notion that the historical Jesus was a simple peasant later revered and deified, with what are we left? Jesus is so stripped down that He becomes the “Christian dummy” of the first century church! The community is more brilliant than the leader! Even Renan, the French skeptic said, “It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus.” Further, if Jesus was such a “regular guy,” why was He crucified? Crucifixion by the Romans was used only for deviants, malcontents, and political revolutionaries (like Barabbas). What did this simple peasant do to create such a stir that He would suffer such a death?

The Jesus Seminar portrayal of Jesus simply cannot explain the explosion of Christianity in the first and second centuries. With their view of Christ, they cannot create a cause monumental enough to explain the documented, historical effects that even they must accept.

Notes

1. Robert W. Funk, “The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels,” *The Fourth R* (November/December, 1993), p. 8.
2. Smithsonian.
3. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), Matthew, 470ff (Mt), 493 (Mk), 511 (Lk), 543 (Jn), 567 (Acts).
4. Robert J. Miller, Editor. *The Complete Gospels* (Harper San Francisco, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994). pp. 10 (Mk), 56 (Mt), 198 (Jn). Note: a date for Luke-Acts is not provided, but on the basis of the book’s date for Mark, we would assume 80 to 100 A.D.
5. James R. Edwards, “Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?” *Christianity Today*: March 4, 1996, p. 17.

False Guilt – Refusing Christ's Atonement

Kerby Anderson provides an insightful look at the important topic of false guilt. He helps us look at the sources of false guilt, its consequences and the cure in Jesus Christ. If we refuse to fully accept Christ's atonement we can be trapped in false guilt, instead we should embrace His atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us.

Introduction

Have you ever felt guilty? Of course you have, usually because you were indeed guilty. But what about those times when you have feelings of guilt even when you didn't do anything wrong? We would call this false guilt, and that is the subject of this essay.

False guilt usually comes from an overactive conscience. It's that badgering pushing voice that runs you and your self-image into the ground. It nags: "You call this acceptable? You think this is enough? Look at all you've not yet done! Look at all you have done that's not acceptable! Get going!"

You probably know the feeling. You start the day feeling like you are in a hole. You feel like you can never do enough. You have this overactive sense of duty and can never seem to rest. One person said he "felt more like a human doing than a human being." Your behavior is driven by a sense of guilt. That is what we will be talking about in these pages.

Much of the material for this discussion is taken from the book entitled *False Guilt* by Steve Shores. His goal is to help you determine if you (1) have an overactive conscience and (2)

are driven by false guilt. If these are problem areas for you, he provides practical solutions so you can break the cycle of false guilt. I recommend his book especially if you can recognize yourself in some of the material we cover in this essay.

In his book, Steve Shores poses three sets of questions, each with some explanation. An affirmative answer to any or all of these questions may indicate that you struggle with false guilt and an overactive conscience.

1. Do you ever feel like this: "Something is wrong with me. There is some stain on me, or something badly flawed that I can neither scrub out nor repair"? Does this feeling persist even though you have become a Christian?

2. Is Thanksgiving sort of a difficult time of year for you? Do you find it hard to muster up the Norman Rockwell spirit—you know... Mom and Dad and grandparents and kids all seated around mounds of food? Dad is carving the turkey with a sure and gentle expression on his face, and everyone looks so...well, so thankful? Do you find yourself, at any time of the year, dutifully thanking or praising God without much passion?

3. How big is your dance floor? What I mean is, How much freedom do you have? Do you feel confined by Christianity? To you, is it mainly a set of restrictions? Is it primarily a source of limits: don't do this, and don't do that? Does your Christianity have more to do with walls than with windows? Is it a place of narrowness or a place where light and air and liberty pour in?

Usually a person driven by false guilt is afraid of freedom because in every act of freedom is the possibility of offending someone. Offending someone is unacceptable. Other people are seen as pipelines of approval. If they're offended, the pipeline shuts down.

False guilt, along with an overactive conscience, is a hard

master. As we turn now to look at the causes and the cures for false guilt, we hope to explain how to break down the confining walls and tiresome chains that may have kept you or a loved one in bondage to false guilt.

The Source of False Guilt

Next, I would like to focus on the source of false guilt: an overactive conscience. What is an overactive conscience? How does it function? Steve Shores says, "The mission of a person's overactive conscience is to attract the expectations of others."

Imagine a light bulb glowing brightly on a warm summer's night. What do you see in your mind's eye? Bugs. Bugs of every variety are attracted to that light. The light bulb serves as a magnet for these insects. Imagine that light is an overactive conscience. The expectations of others are the "bugs" that are attracted to the "light" of an overactive conscience.

Now imagine a light bulb burning inside a screened porch. The bugs are still attracted, but they bounce off the screen. The overactive conscience has no screen. But it is more than that. The overactive conscience doesn't want a screen. The more "bugs" the better. Why? Because the whole purpose is to meet expectations in order to gain approval and fill up the emptiness of the soul. This is an overactive conscience, a light bulb with lots of bugs and no screen.

A key to understanding the overactive conscience is the word "active." Someone with false guilt has a conscience that is always on the go. False guilt makes a person restless, continually looking for a rule to be kept, a scruple to observe, an expectation to be fulfilled, or a way to be an asset to a person or a group.

The idea of being an asset is a crucial point. When I am an

asset, then I am a “good” person and life works pretty well. When I fear I’ve let someone down, then I am a liability. My life falls apart, and I will work hard to win my way back into the favor of others.

So an overactive conscience is like a magnet for expectations. These expectations come from oneself, parents (whether alive or not), friends, bosses, peers, God, or distorted images of God. False guilt makes the overactive conscience voracious for expectations. False guilt is always looking for people to please and rules to be kept.

An overactive conscience is also seeking to keep the “carrot” of acceptance just out of reach. This “carrot” includes self-acceptance and acceptance from others and from God. The guilt-ridden conscience continually says, “Your efforts are not good enough. You must keep trying because, even if your attempts don’t measure up, the trying itself counts as something.”

For that reason, an overactive conscience is not happy at rest. Though rest is the birthright of the Christian, relaxing is just too dangerous, i.e., relaxing might bring down my guard, and I might miss signs of rejection. Besides, acceptance is conditional, and I must continually prove my worthiness to others. I can never be a liability if I am to expect acceptance to continue. It is hard to relax because I must be ever fearful of letting someone down and must constantly work to gain acceptance.

In summary, a person with false guilt and an overactive conscience spends much of his or her life worn out. Unrelenting efforts to meet the expectations of others can have some very negative consequences.

The Consequences of False Guilt

Now I would like to focus on the consequences of false guilt. An overactive conscience can keep you in a state of constant

uncertainty. You never know if you measure up. You never know if you have arrived or not. You are always on the alert. According to Steve Shores there are a number of major consequences of false guilt.

The first consequence he calls "striving without arriving." In essence, there is no hope in the system set up by the overactive conscience. You must always try harder, but you never cross the finish line. You seem to merely go in circles. Or perhaps it would be better to say you go in a spiral, as in a downward spiral. Life is a perpetual treadmill. You work hard and strive, but you never arrive. Life is hard work and frustration with little or no satisfaction.

The second consequence is "constant vigilance." The overactive conscience produces constant self-monitoring. You are constantly asking if you are being an asset to other people and to God. You are constantly evaluating and even doubting your performance. And you never allow yourself to be a liability to the group or to any particular individual.

A third consequence is "taking the pack mule approach to life." An overactive conscience involves a lifelong ordeal in which you attempt to pass a demanding test and thus reveal your worth. The test consists of accumulating enough evidences of goodness to escape the accusation that you are worthless. For the guilt-ridden person, this test involves taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles. As the burdens pile higher and higher, you become a beast of burden, a "pack mule" who takes on more responsibility than is healthy or necessary.

Just as there is no forward progress (e.g., "striving without arriving"), so there is also an ever-increasing sense of burden. Each day demands a fresh validation of worthiness. There is never a time when you can honestly say, "that's enough."

Finally, the most devastating consequence of false guilt is

its effect not just on individuals but the body of Christ. Christians who struggle with an overactive conscience can produce weak, hollow, compliant believers in the church. They are long on conformity and short on passion and substance. They go to church not because they crave fellowship, but because they want to display compliance. They study God's word not so much out of a desire to grow spiritually, but because that is what good Christians are supposed to do. We do what we do in order to "fit in" or comply with the rules of Christianity.

Steve Shores says that the central question of church becomes, "Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?" Instead we should be asking, "Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the disruptive sacrifice of Christ?"

The Continuation of False Guilt

Next, I would like to talk about why people continue to feel false guilt even though they know they are forgiven. After all, if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, why do some Christians still have an overactive conscience and continue to feel guilt so acutely? Part of the compulsion comes from feeling the noose of false guilt tighten around our necks so that we panic and fail to think rationally about our situation.

Steve Shores uses the example of a death-row inmate who has just learned of an eleventh-hour stay of execution. He has just been pardoned, but his body and emotions don't feel like it. He has been "sitting in the electric chair, sweaty-palmed and nauseated, when the wall phone rings with the news of the reprieve." He may feel relief, but the feeling of relief is not total. He is only off the hook for awhile. He will still return to his cell.

The person with a overactive conscience lives in that death-row cell. The reprieve comes from responding to that guilt-driven voice in his conscience. For Bill it manifested itself in a compulsive need to serve others. If he were asked to teach AWANA or to teach a Sunday school class, he would have great difficulty saying "No." He had to say "Yes" or else he would feel the noose of false guilt tighten around his neck.

Bill's comments were sad but illuminating. He said: "I felt as though not teaching the class would confirm that I am a liability. The disappointment...would inflict shame I felt as a boy. Disappointing others always meant that there would be some sort of trial to decide whether I really belonged in the family."

He went on to tell of the time he made a "C" on his report card (the rest of the grades were "A's" and "B's"). His father lectured him unmercifully. At one point, his father declared that "it was Communist to bring home such a bad grade." Bill didn't know what a Communist was or what Communism had to do with bad grades. But he did understand that if he didn't bring home good grades he was unworthy.

Bill even remembered the six agonizing weeks until the next report card. When it arrived he received five "A's" and one "B." What was his father's response? Was it delight? Was it an apology for his previous comments? Not at all. His father merely said, "That's more like it." The reprieve was halfhearted and temporary.

In essence, false guilt is a stern warden that may give a temporary reprieve but is always ready to call upon you to prove your worthiness once again. We may know that Christ died for our sins. We may know that our sins are forgiven. We may know that we have value and dignity because we are created in God's image. But we may feel unworthy and feel as if we must prove ourselves at a moment's notice.

The key, as we will see in the next section, is to embrace Christ's atonement rather than our own. We must not only know that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ, but act upon that reality so that we live a life through grace rather than legalism.

A Cure for False Guilt

Finally, I would like to conclude by talking about Christ's atonement for us. If we are to break the chain of false guilt, then we must embrace Christ's atonement rather than our own. Although that statement may seem obvious, it is difficult for someone with an overactive conscience to truly embrace emotionally. For such a person, perfection is the means of achieving salvation. If I can be perfect, then I will no longer feel shame, and I will no longer feel guilt. This is the personal atonement that someone with false guilt often is seeking.

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ's atonement was for our sins. Sin is "any attitude, belief, or action that constitutes rebellion against or transgression of God's character." Clearly sinful man is incapable of making restitution because our best works are as filthy rags before a holy and omnipotent God (Isaiah 64:6). Our atonement must be made by someone with clean hands and a sinless life. Christ, of course, fulfilled that requirement and died in our place for our sins.

Nevertheless, someone with false guilt seeks a form of self-atonement. Why? Well, there are at least two reasons: indiscriminate shame and doubt about the character of God. The first is indiscriminate shame. We should feel guilty and we should feel shame for sinful behavior. The problem comes when we feel guilt and shame even when a sinful action or attitude is not present. Steve Shores believes that the "weeds of shame" can begin to sprout even when we have a legitimate need. We then tend to use the machete of false guilt to trim these weeds back. We say, "If I can do enough things right, I

can control this and no one will know how bad and weak I am.” This performance-oriented lifestyle is a way of hacking at the weeds that grow in the soil of illegitimate shame.

The second reason for false guilt is a stubborn propensity to doubt the character of God. Many Christian psychologists and counselors have argued that the reason we may question our Heavenly Father’s character is because we question our earthly father’s character. And for those who have been abused or neglected by their fathers, this is an adequate explanation. But we even see in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve doubting God and they did not even have earthly fathers. So I believe it is more accurate to say that our sin nature (not our family of origin) has a lot to do with our tendency to doubt God’s character.

This is manifested by two tendencies: blaming and hiding. When we feel false guilt, we tend to want to blame others or blame ourselves. If we blame others, we manifest a critical spirit. If we blame ourselves, we feel unworthy and don’t want others to see us as we are and we hide emotionally from others. The solution is for us to embrace Christ’s atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us. Christ died once for all (Romans 6:10) that we might have everlasting life and freedom from guilt and the bondage to sin.

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Angels: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly – The Range of

Angelic Activity

Sue Bohlin presents accounts of angelic activity in our world today consistent with the biblical account of angels and their actions. From a biblical worldview perspective, she considers both the involvement of good angels and bad angels in the circumstances of life. A good understanding of angelic activity will aid us in understanding the full world around us, both the seen and the unseen.

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



I was about thirteen years old when I had my first encounter with an angel. I was going upstairs to my room, pulling my entire weight on the handrail, when it suddenly came off in my hand. I fell backwards, head first. Halfway into a terrible fall, I felt a strong hand on my back push me upright. There was nobody there—well, nobody *visible*!

Angel stories are always fascinating, and in this essay I address angels: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good angels are the holy ones, the bad angels are the evil ones, which the Bible calls demons, and the ugly angels are demons disguising themselves as good angels. These ugly angels have deceived many people in a culture that has embraced “angel mania.”

The Good Angels

The book of Hebrews calls angels “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). Angels minister in many ways to us, and I’d like to look at some of their ministries with examples from the scriptures as well as some modern anecdotes.

Provision

The Lord uses His angels to physically provide for His own. It was an angel who brought Elijah bread and water while fleeing from Jezebel after his victory on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 19:5-6).

In 1944, the penniless wife of a pastor and evangelist in Switzerland, Susie Ware prayed, "God, I need five pounds of potatoes, two pounds of pastry flour, apples, pears, a cauliflower, carrots, veal cutlets for Saturday, and beef for Sunday." A few hours later, someone knocked on the door, and there was a young man carrying a basket, who said, "Mrs. Ware, I am bringing what you asked for." It was precisely what she'd prayed for—down to the exact brand of pastry flour she wanted. The young man slipped away, and even though Rev. and Mrs. Ware watched at the window to their building, the man never exited. He just disappeared. [\[1\]](#)

Guidance

Sometimes, angels give guidance so God's people will know what He wants us to do. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take Mary as his wife and to name her baby Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-21)

And it was an angel who told Philip where to go in his travels so that he could meet the Ethiopian eunuch and lead him to Christ. (Acts 8:26)

My friend Lee experienced the comfort of guidance from an angel when the other men in his army unit were pressuring him to visit a red-light district. As he prayed for strength, an invisible messenger came to him and said, quite audibly from about ten feet away, "Have no fear of them. Do not succumb. I will sustain you and deliver you."

Encouragement

Angelic ministry to us can include powerful encouragement. When Paul and his shipmates were caught in a horrible storm and faced shipwreck, an angel appeared to him, assured him that not a life would be lost, and that he would live to stand trial before Caesar. (Acts 27:23)

One mother of a young girl told me that the night after her daughter's cancer surgery, a very tall nurse with long braids, a real Amazon, ministered to her all night long. She was caring for the girl with a strong but gentle tenderness, and talking with the mom about how good God is. After they went home, the mother decided to write a thank-you note to the nurse, and called the hospital to ask for her name. Everyone—even the head of nursing—insisted that there was no nurse with that description working at the hospital. She believes God sent an angel to encourage her through that dark night.

Protection

This world is a dangerous place, and angels can provide supernatural protection. Daniel 6 tells the story of how an angel shut the mouths of the lions when he was thrown into their den.

A young lady named Myra worked in the inner-city ministry of Teen Challenge in Philadelphia. One neighborhood gang liked to terrorize anyone who tried to enter the Teen Challenge building, and they harassed Myra as well. One night, when she was alone in the building with the gang banging on the door, she felt she should continue to try to reach out to them with the gospel of Jesus. As she opened the door, she breathed a prayer for protection. The boys suddenly stopped their shouting, looked at each other, turned and left quietly. Myra had no idea why.

Later on, as the staff people were able to build relationships with the gang members, the ministry director asked them why they dropped their threats against Myra and left her alone that night. One young man spoke up, saying, "We wouldn't dare touch her after her boyfriend showed up. That dude had to be seven feet tall." The director said, "I didn't know Myra had a boyfriend. But at any rate, she was here alone that night." Another gang member insisted, "No, we saw him. He was right behind her, big as life in his classy white suit." {2}

Another young woman walking home from work in Brooklyn had to go past a young man loitering against a building. She was fearful; there had been muggings in the area recently, and she prayed for protection. She had to go right by him, and although she could feel him watching her, he didn't move. A short time after she reached home, she heard sirens and saw police lights. The next day her neighbor told her someone had been raped, in the same place and just after she had passed by the young man.

She wondered if the man she'd passed was the rapist, because if it were, she could identify him. She called the police and discovered they had a suspect in custody. She identified him in a lineup and asked the policeman, "Why didn't he attack *me*? I was just as vulnerable as the next woman who came along." The policeman was curious too, so he described the woman and asked the suspect about her. He said, "I remember her. But why would I have bothered her? She was walking down the street with two big guys, one on either side of her." {3}

Rescue

Sometimes, angels rescue people in danger. It was an angel—if not the Angel of the Lord, who is the pre-incarnate Christ—who joined Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, rescuing them from the flames (Daniel 3).

My friend John told me that he and a friend were walking

through a rough neighborhood one night when 12 or 15 gang members jumped them. John took two punches and sank to the ground. He expected to be robbed and severely beaten, but he wasn't. Instead, he heard a voice from about six feet up: "It's okay, they're gone." He looked up and saw his friend who mysteriously was now about 25 feet away, leaning against a wall with his fists still clenched as if he were ready to fight. But there was no gang. They just disappeared. And there was nobody next to John.

Warrior Angels

The ministry of warrior angels catches the imagination in a special way. The prophet Elisha prayed that the Lord would open the eyes of his servant so he could see the mighty angelic army of God protecting them.

In Nazi Germany, one mother took her little boy, who was unchurched, to a shelter run by nuns that had become known as a safe place because nothing bad ever seemed to happen there. His first night, while everyone else was praying that God would protect them, this little boy kept his eyes open. After the "amen," he told his mother, "It came up to here on them!" and pointed to his breastbone. When asked what he meant, he said, "The gutter came up to here on them!" A nurse asked, "What are you talking about?" and he told her that he saw men filled with light guarding each corner of the shelter, so tall that they towered above the roof. The shelter was protected by huge warrior angels that only a little boy could see.[\[4\]](#)

Guardian Angels

Do we have guardian angels? The Bible doesn't give a definitive answer on that, although the Lord Jesus did say, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 18:10) And Psalm 91:11 promises, "For He will command His angels concerning you to

guard you in all your ways.”

One day, when my son was a baby, I tripped while I was holding him, and he went flying headlong toward a brick wall. There was nothing I could do to protect him, but I watched as he inexplicably stopped an inch from the wall and fell gently to the carpet. I knew immediately that an angel’s hand had been his bumper pad.

These are only a few of the stories of thousands about angels who protected and rescued people, both Christians and non-Christians. But a nagging question continues to arise: where are the angels when girls are raped, and drunk drivers crash headlong into a car of teenagers, and evil people blow up buildings with hundreds of innocent people in them?

The angels are still there, continuing to minister in pain and death. We usually don’t realize the role of angels in the midst of horrible circumstances because their work is unseen and often unfelt.

Behind the question of, “Where are the angels?” is the very difficult problem of why a good God would allow pain and suffering. The book of Job gives us two important insights into the problem of pain: first, when disasters and suffering assail us in the physical realm, there may be something bigger and more important going on in the unseen spiritual realm.^{5} Second, God never gives Job an answer to his demand to know the “why”: He just says, “I am the sovereign Lord, acting in ways you cannot understand. You just need to trust Me, that I know what I’m doing.” The fact that God is in control, that He allows all pain and suffering for a reason, is the great comfort that we need to remember when it seems like the angels have forsaken us. They haven’t, because God hasn’t.

The Bad Angels

There are good angels, and there are bad angels. All of them

were created as holy angels, but about a third of them rebelled against God and fell from their sinless position. Satan, the leader of these demons or unholy angels, is a liar, a murderer, and a thief. (John 10:10) He hates God and he passionately hates God's people. The Bible tells us that he prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). We need to remember that Satan and all the demons are supernaturally brilliant, and Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

It's this masquerade as a holy angel that is behind the current angel craze in our culture. While there are a number of wonderful Christian books available that relate stories of holy angels helping people, there are many books, publications, and seminars that are filled with demonic deception of the ugliest kind. Because when you start talking to angels, you end up dealing with demons.

The Ugly Angels

The enemy of our souls is using a new twist on an old lie, exploiting the current interest in angels to attract the untaught and the undiscerning. Much of the current angel mania is simply New Age philosophy, which is actually old-fashioned pantheism. Pantheism is the belief that everything—an impersonal God as well as every part of the creation—is one big unity. All is one, God is one, we are God—and New Age philosophy throws reincarnation into the mix as well.

You know you're around "ugly angels," or demons masquerading as angels of light and holiness, when you see or hear these terms:

1. Contacting or communing with angels.

There are now books available with titles like *Ask Your Angels*[\[6\]](#) and *100 Ways to Attract Angels*[\[7\]](#). But the Bible gives neither permission nor precedent for contacting angels.

When people start calling on angels, it's not the holy angels who answer. They're demons, disguising themselves as good angels to people who don't know how to tell the difference.

2. Loving our angels, praying to our angels.

Some self-styled "angel experts" instruct their followers to love their angels and call upon them for health, healing, prosperity, and guidance. But angels are God's servants, and all this attention and emphasis and glory should go to God, not His servants. God says, "I will not share my glory with another" (Isaiah 42:8). Scripture makes no mention of loving angels—only God, His word, and people. And it never tells us to pray to angels, only to the Lord Himself.

3. Instruction, knowledge, or insight from angels, particularly ones with names.

Some angel teachers are proclaiming that angels are trying very hard to contact us, so they can give us deeper knowledge of the spiritual{8}. Invariably, this "angel knowledge" is a mixture of truth and lies, and never stands up to the absolute truth of Scripture.

There are four angel names that keep popping up in the angel literature: Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael. Michael and Gabriel are the only angels mentioned by name in the Bible. The other two show up in the apocryphal *First Book of Enoch*, which includes a fanciful account of the actions of these four beings. [Note: it has been brought to my attention that there are actually two other named angels in the Bible: Apollyon, the angel of the abyss in Revelation 9:11, and Satan, who is an evil, fallen angel.] Those who report modern day angel teachings are actually channeling information from demons.

4. Special knowledge or teachings from angels.

Naomi Albright distributes teachings about the deep meanings of colors, and numbers and letters of the alphabet which she

claims is “knowledge given from above and brought forth in more detail by the High Angelic Master Sheate, Lady Master Cassandra, and Angel Carpelpous, and the Master Angel, One on High.”[{9}](#) These same beings told Mrs. Albright to stress two main teachings: first, that God accepts all religions, and second, Reincarnation.[{10}](#) These two teachings keep showing up in much of the New Age angel literature, which shouldn’t be surprising since they are heretical lies that come from the pit of hell, which is where the demons feeding these lies to the teachers are from.

Other angel teachings are that all is a part of God (pantheism); the learner is set apart from others by the “deep” knowledge that the angels give (this is a basic draw to the occult); and that eventually, the one who pursues contact with these angels will be visited by an Ascended Master or a Shining Angel (which is a personal encounter with a demon).

We need to remember that God’s angels are not teachers. God’s word says they are messengers—that’s what “angel” means—and they minister to us. God has revealed to us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), so any hidden knowledge that spirit beings try to impart is by nature occultic and demonic.

5. Human divinity

The message of the ugly angels is that we need to recognize that we are one with the divine, we are divine . . . we are God. In Karen Goldman’s *The Angel Book: A Handbook for Aspiring Angels*, she says things like, “Angels don’t fall out of the sky; they emerge from within.”[{11}](#) And, “The whole purpose in life is to know your Angel Self, accept it and be it. In this way we finally experience true oneness.”[{12}](#)

The following bit of heretical garbage was channeled from a demon posing as an angel named Daephrenocles: “The wondrous light of the Angels, from the elohim to the Archangels to the

Devas and Nature Spirits, are all bringing to you the realization that you are magnificent—you are divine now and divine first.”[\[13\]](#)

Much of the angel literature refers to “the angel within.” But angels are a separate part of the creation. They were created before man as a different kind. They are not within us. The movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” notwithstanding, when we hear a bell ring it does not mean that an angel is getting his wings. Nor do good people, especially children, become angels when they die. We remain human beings—not angels, and certainly not God.

What our culture needs in response to the angel craze is strong discernment built on the foundation of God’s word. We need to remember, and share with others, three truths about angels:

1. The ministry of holy angels will never contradict the Bible.
2. The actions of holy angels will always be consistent with the character of Christ.
3. A genuine encounter with a holy angel will glorify God, not the angel. Holy angels never draw attention to themselves. They typically do their work and disappear.

It’s very true that many have “entertained angels unaware” (Hebrews 13:2). But we need to make sure we’re entertaining the right kind of angels!

Notes

1. Anderson, Joan Wester. *Where Angels Walk* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), pp. 60-62.
2. Malz, Betty. *Angels Watching Over Me* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1986), p. 40-41.
3. Anderson, p. 93-95.

4. Ibid, p. 162-163.
5. Webber, Marilyn Carlson and William D. Webber, *A Rustle of Angels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), p. 66.
6. Daniel, Alma, Timothy Wyllie, and Andrew Ramer, *Ask Your Angels* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).
7. Sharp, Sally, *100 Ways to Attract Angels* (Minnesota: Trust Publications, 1994).
8. Karyn Martin-Kuri, in an interview with *Body Mind and Spirit* journal, May/June 1993. Also, Albright, Naomi, *Angel Walk* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Portals Press, 1990).
9. *Paths of Light* newsletter, Angel Walk F.O.L. (Followers of Light), No. 24, July 1994, p. 6-10.
10. Albright, *Angel Walk*, p. 77-78.
11. Goldman, Karen, *The Angel Book—A Handbook for Aspiring Angels* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1988), p. 20.
12. Ibid, p. 95.
13. *These Celestial Times* newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 1. (Gaithersburg, Maryland), p. 4.

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Is There Really a Hell?

Rick Rood discusses the biblical teaching on hell, as well as the practical effects of this belief for Christians.

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



The story has been told of C. S. Lewis listening to a young preacher's sermon on the subject of God's judgment on sin. At the end of his message, the young man said: "If you do not receive Christ as Savior, you will suffer grave eschatological

ramifications!" After the service, Lewis asked him the question, "Do you mean that a person who doesn't believe in Christ will go to hell?" "Precisely," was his response. "Then say so," Lewis replied. [\(1\)](#)

This story illustrates something that most Christians know, but few articulate: that of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the one we feel most uncomfortable discussing is the doctrine of eternal punishment or hell. And it is not difficult to understand why this is so. The doctrine of hell is offensive to unbelievers, and contradicts the emphasis on tolerance and on human potential that dominates our times. Who of us enjoys alienating our friends by speaking of eternal judgment for sin? For many of us, the doctrine of hell is also difficult to reconcile with the the love and grace of God. Furthermore, we are well aware of Christians who have misused the doctrine of hell by using it to manipulate and control other people. In seeking to distance ourselves from the abuse of this doctrine, and to avoid appearing intolerant and uncaring, many of us have eliminated the word "hell" entirely from our vocabulary (making our belief an entirely personal matter).

Recent surveys have revealed some very interesting facts about current attitudes toward hell. A survey conducted by George Gallup in 1990 revealed that just under 60% of Americans believe there is a hell (down over 10% from 1978), though only 4% believe that hell was their own personal destination. A survey in the mid-1980s of American evangelical college and seminary students revealed that only one in ten believed that the first step in influencing unbelievers for Christ should be to warn about hell. 46% of seminary students believed that to emphasize to non-believers that eternal judgment would be a consequence of rejecting Christ was "in poor taste." A survey conducted in 1981 revealed that 50% of theology faculty believe in the existence of hell (61% of Roman Catholics, and 34% of Protestants)! [\(2\)](#)

In spite of the prevailing current attitudes toward hell revealed by these surveys, however, it is still apparent to most Christians that the doctrine of hell is firmly grounded in the teaching of Scripture. All but one of the letters of the Apostle Paul mention the wrath or judgment of God on sin. And of the twelve uses of the word *gehenna* (the strongest word for hell) in the New Testament, eleven come from the lips of Jesus himself! In fact, the Savior taught more about hell than He did about heaven! Of the more than 1850 verses recording the words of Christ, 13% pertain to the topics of judgment and hell. Of the 40 or so parables uttered by Jesus, more than half relate to God's eternal judgment on sin. Surprisingly, the much beloved "Sermon on the Mount" contains some of Jesus' most straightforward words about hell!

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

In his book simply titled "Inferno," Dante Alighieri describes in great detail his imaginary tour through nine levels of hell. Dante's book makes for fascinating reading. But to learn what hell is really like, we must turn to another source: the Bible.

As we begin reading through the Old Testament, we find frequent references to "sheol" (the world of departed spirits) as the abode of all the dead (cf. Deut. 32:22). As we continue reading, we find also that a day will come when the bodies of all who are in sheol will be resurrected: some to "everlasting life" but others to "everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

The common belief of godly rabbis during the intertestamental era that sheol was divided into two sections is reflected in the New Testament, which refers to the abode of the righteous as "Paradise" (Lk. 23:43) or "Abraham's bosom" (Lk. 16:22), and the abode of the unrighteous as "Hades" (Lk. 16:23). After Christ's resurrection, it appears that those who resided in Paradise were ushered into the presence of God in heaven where they await the future resurrection of their bodies. But those

who are in Hades await a resurrection to a different destination— hell.

The word that is used most frequently in the New Testament for hell is *Gehenna*. Gehenna is a reference to the Valley of Hinnom located on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the city's "garbage dump" during Jesus' time. The fires that burned here never went out.

As did his contemporaries, Jesus referred to Gehenna as the place where "the fire is not quenched" and where "their worm does not die" (Mk. 9:48). Whether He implied a literal flame and a literal worm is not of great importance. Jesus also described hell as a place of "outer darkness" (Mt. 22:13). But it is clear that He meant us to understand that hell is a place of continual deterioration and suffering for those who inhabit it! Jesus also referred to those who were cast into hell as being "cast outside" (Mt. 8:12), or as Paul simply puts it "away from the presence of the Lord" (II Thess. 1:9). Hell is a place of exclusion and loss of every blessing that comes from God. Hell is described as a place of "contempt" by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 12:2)—where every person is despised by every other inhabitant. As one writer has put it: "Sinners in hell will have company but no sympathy" [\(3\)](#)

Jesus said hell will be a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:42). The weeping no doubt speaks of terrible remorse and grief. But the gnashing of teeth speaks of intense anger—anger at oneself, anger at Satan, anger at God. Paul speaks of hell's inhabitants as experiencing "wrath and anger ... trouble and distress" (Rom. 2:8-9).

The Bible also tells us that in hell not all will be judged alike. Jesus made it clear that there will be degrees of judgment in hell. He said that the one "who knew his master's will and did not ... act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few" (Lk.

12:47-48). But though not all will be judged equally, all will be judged with certainty. Exodus 34:7 tells us that though the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, ... yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Does the Bible teach that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for sin? One alternative proposal is that for many (if not all) a second opportunity will be given after death to respond to the grace of God. Appeal is usually made to the statement in Peter’s first letter that “the gospel ... has been preached even to those who are dead” (4:6). William Barclay states that in this passage we find a “glimpse of nothing less than the gospel of a second chance” (Commentary on the Epistles of Peter). Yet, the context makes clear that he is speaking of those to whom the gospel was preached during their lifetime, but who now were deceased! There is no indication at all that a “post-mortem” opportunity to repent exists.

In John 8, Jesus says that for those who “die in their sins” there is no possibility of joining Him in heaven (vv. 21,24). In contrasting the expectation of the believer of being reunited with loved ones in heaven, he says that unbelievers “have no (such) hope” (I Thess. 4:13). These statements are difficult to reconcile with the belief that the deceased are offered a second opportunity after death. Hebrews 9:27 says that “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”

Another proposal, that is gaining a wider acceptance today, is that unbelievers will simply be snuffed out of existence or “annihilated.” Support for this belief is often sought in statements throughout Scripture that describe sinners as “perishing” or being “destroyed.” The psalmist says, “May the wicked perish before God” (68:2). The same word, however, is

used in Isaiah 57:1 to refer to the righteous: "The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart." It is clear that in the latter case, the word implies "severe suffering." It could not possibly mean that the righteous are "extinguished." There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the opposite is the case when the word is used to describe the fate of sinners. To "perish" or be "destroyed" means to "suffer ruin," not to be "annihilated."

That the Bible teaches eternal conscious punishment for sin in hell, is the only deduction that can be reached from the fact that the most emphatic words available to the biblical writers were consistently used to describe hell's endless duration, as well as to describe the duration of heaven, and even the eternal existence of God! Just as Jesus described the destiny of the righteous as "eternal life," so He described the destiny of the unrighteous as "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:46). Just as John described God as the one who "lives forever and ever" (Rev. 15:7), so He described the fire of hell as lasting "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11).

Sometimes it is said that the Greek word for eternal (*aionios*) really means "age lasting," implying that at the end of a series of ages God will empty hell of all its inhabitants. Those who hold this interpretation, however, fail to recall that while this present age is finite in duration, it was the common understanding among Jesus' listeners that the "age to come" was eternal!

In reference to the fate of Judas, Jesus said: "It would have been better for him if he had never been born" (Mt. 26:24). If indeed it is as terrible a fate as these words suggest, and if it is eternal in duration, why would a loving God send people to hell? If God is a God of love, why would He consign anyone to an eternity as terrible as the Bible describes the fate of those whose destiny is hell?

Perhaps the biblical doctrine of hell can begin to make more

sense to us when we reexamine our understanding of two other teachings of Scripture: the nature of God, and the nature of man and of sin.

One of the wonderful revelations of Scripture is that God is a God of infinite love and grace. Who of us is not refreshed when we read the words of the psalmist: "But Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (86:15)? Yet it is the same God who is also described as the One who "will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:7)! The God who loves the sinner is also the God whose "eyes are too pure to approve evil" and who cannot "look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13). The psalmist quotes God at one point as saying, "You thought that I was just like you" (50:21). But we are in need of the realization that just as God's love is far beyond our own, so the purity of his holiness exceeds all our conceptions! When Isaiah was granted a vision of the Lord on his throne, he was shaken by his impression of his holiness (Isa. 6:3)! For sure, God is a God of indescribable love, but He is just as much a God of absolute holiness and righteousness! When we gain a vision of the holiness of God as it is portrayed in the Bible, we begin to understand the reasonableness of the doctrine of hell.

We are also helped when we allow Scripture to more fully inform us in our comprehension of the nature of man and of sin. The emphasis in our generation on the value and dignity of the human person has been a welcome corrective to a past overemphasis on the depravity of man. Yet it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that though we are indeed created in the image of God and of very special value in His eyes, nonetheless we are also deeply and indelibly stained by sin in every area of our being. The God who knows every thought and motive of every human heart, said that it "is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Jesus himself said that "from within, out of

the heart of men, proceed (all manner of evil)" by which we are defiled (Mk. 7:21-23)!

When Ezra learned of the disobedience of the people of Israel in marrying unbelievers, he said, "I tore my garment and my robe, ... and sat down appalled" (Ezra 9:3). When the Apostle Paul saw the city of Athens filled with idols, "his spirit was ... provoked within him" (Acts 17:16)! Is it possible that we have lost something of the sense of the seriousness of sin that seemed to grip the heart of these two men?

Some have objected that while sin is certainly worthy of punishment, a "finite" sin is hardly worthy of the "infinite" punishment of hell. But that our rebellion against God should be considered "finite" in nature is not entirely clear.

When we consider that the One against whom we have rebelled is the One who gave us life, who is the source of every good thing that we know in life, and who has extended his love by giving his own Son as payment for our sin, how can we possibly measure the gravity of our sin or the punishment it deserves? When we consider too that there is no indication that those in hell will ever experience a "change of heart" in attitude toward God, perhaps we can see that God's judgment is entirely just.

The Doctrine of Hell: What Difference Does It Make?

We want to focus on three areas of life that should be impacted by our understanding of the biblical doctrine of hell.

The first is our attitude toward sin ... particularly our own. A number of years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* In it he challenged the popular notion that all of our thoughts and actions can be accounted for by factors beyond our own personal control, that we are

rarely responsible for our own conduct. For sure, there are “mitigating” factors in most of our lives that influence our character and conduct to greater or lesser degree. And God is not unaware of these things. “He knows our frame, that we are but dust” (Ps. 103:14). He knows as well that we are born with a sinful nature that is beyond the power of human will to overcome (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). But He also knows that the choice is our own as to whether we approve and condone the fruit of our sinful nature, or whether we turn to Him for grace to hold in check our sinful impulses and to learn to follow his will. In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “Thy will be done.” The choice is ours as to which kind of person we will become.

When we realize that we are responsible for what we choose to do about our sin, and that it is more than merely an act that may result in unpleasant consequences for ourselves, but that it is also a disposition of rebellion against God, that requires his holy judgment, we cannot help but become more sensitive to its presence in our lives!

The second result of a biblical understanding of hell is a much greater appreciation for the grace and salvation we have received from God! Our appreciation for the immense value of this gift is greatly enhanced when we fully comprehend the nature of that from which we have been delivered. Our perception of the awesomeness of salvation is determined in large measure by our perception of the awfulness of hell!

Finally, a biblical understanding of hell should move us to include in our proclamation of the gospel a clear warning about the consequence of failing to respond. We need to be more forthright than the preacher whom Charles Spurgeon reported as saying, “If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be sent to the place which it is not polite to mention.” [\(4\)](#) C.S. Lewis once said: “If Christianity only

means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference.” (5) If there really is a hell, then Christianity is far more than one more bit of good advice!

In his book *Our Guilty Silence*, John Stott recounts how the seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries to China, not wanting to offend the sensitivities of the Chinese, excluded the cross of Christ and other details from their message. Quoting Hugh Trevor-Roper, Stott says, “We do not learn that they made many lasting converts by the unobjectionable residue of the story.” (6)

There is little question that the doctrine of hell has at times been abused. But as one writer has well put it: “May its misuse not result in its disuse” in our efforts to lead people to Christ.

Notes

1. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992. p. 13
2. Dixon, pp. 10-13; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp.2-3.
3. John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992, p. 146.
4. Quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991, p. 171.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960, p. 133)

6. John Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd, p. 45.

Recommended Resources on the Subject of Hell:

Blanchard, John. *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992.

Dixon, Larry. *The Other Side of the Good News*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992.

Fernando, Ajith. *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.

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Walls, Jerry L. *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

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The Truth About Heaven

Rick Rood analyzes the teaching of the Bible about heaven, as well as the practical effects of the Christian belief in heaven.



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

What images come to mind when you think of Heaven? Do you think of a mode of life that is exciting and fulfilling? Or do the words of the epitaph of one dear soul come nearer to hitting the mark?

Weep not for me, friend, tho' death do us sever, I am going to do nothing forever and ever. [{1}](#)

Does Heaven awaken for you a sense of anticipation, or does it evoke visions of monotonous and boring inactivity?

What is Heaven really like? Is Heaven even something we should spend much time thinking about? Or should we relegate thoughts of Heaven to the dusty corners of our mind, lest we render ourselves of little earthly good?

In this essay we want to focus on what the Bible teaches about Heaven, and how these teachings should impact the way we live. We will note some of the foundational truths about Heaven revealed in Scripture.

We know first of all that Heaven is the spiritual realm in which the glory of God's presence is manifest, and in which dwell the angels of God, and all believers who have departed this world (Heb. 12:22-24). The few glimpses of Heaven given in Scripture reveal a pervading sense of the holiness of God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4-5), which had an alarming and overwhelming impact on those who were granted such visions (Isa. 6; Dan. 7:9-28). Isaiah, when he saw the Lord sitting on His throne, said, "Woe is me . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

We are also informed that it is a place which human words are inadequate to fully describe. Ezekiel could only describe what the glory of Heaven was "like" or "resembles" (Ezek. 1). In reporting on his apparent visit to heaven, the apostle Paul said that he "heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:4). What he saw was not only

impermissible but impossible to describe in human terms! Heaven is certainly among those things he described elsewhere as “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9)! No wonder Paul says in another place that we shall be “astonished” when we see the Lord at His coming in glory (2 Thess. 1:10)!

Third, we know that for those who belong to Christ, Heaven is their immediate destination after death. To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul said that “to be absent from the body (is to be) at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), and that should he depart this world, he would “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But there is really no reason to believe we will not be. To be infinite in relation to time is an attribute only God can possess. We know that Scripture speaks of “months” in Heaven (Rev. 22:2) and even “ages” to come (Eph. 2:7). Certainly also, the music which will be sung in Heaven requires a temporal mode of existence. It seems apparent also that in Heaven we will be cognizant, to some degree, of what is transpiring on earth. When Moses and Elijah met the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, it’s recorded that they discussed Jesus’ coming return to glory (Luke 9:30-31). And during the coming tribulation period we are told that the saints in Heaven will be anxiously awaiting the completion of God’s purposes on earth (Rev. 6:10-11). Until His kingdom comes, even in Heaven the question will be asked, “How long, O Lord?” (as these saints are recorded as imploring).

Oswald Sanders said: “God has not told us all we’d like to know, but He has told us all we need to know” about Heaven [{2}](#). So, let’s look closer now at more of what the Bible does tell us about existence in heaven.

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Spiritual Changes!

Mark Twain once sarcastically asserted that in Heaven, for twelve hours every day we will all sing one hymn over and over again.^{3} Hardly an inviting thought! The Bible, however, paints a much different picture of what life in Heaven will be like. Consider just a few of Heaven's most significant characteristics.

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of "the hope of righteousness" for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body (Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold "the glory of the Lord" we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him "just as He is." And when we do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

Second, in Heaven our comprehension of the nature of God will be greatly expanded. The apostle Paul says that "though now we see through a glass darkly," then we shall "see face to face" and "shall know fully, as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12). It is

this knowledge I am convinced that will move us to spontaneously join the heavenly chorus in singing hymns of praise to Almighty God. From the few glimpses of heavenly worship we are granted in Scripture, we learn that our praise of God will focus both on who He is—the eternal, holy, almighty God (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8)—and on what He has done (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14). If our worship of God is muted now, it is at least partially because we do not yet fully comprehend the greatness of His glory and the awesomeness of His creative and redemptive work. But in Heaven we will gain much clearer insight into the wisdom of God displayed in the intricacies of His creation, and of His marvelous purposes manifest in His redeeming work. Some have wondered how we could be happy in heaven knowing that some of God’s creatures are enduring His eternal judgment. It seems apparent, however, that in Heaven we will gain a much clearer perspective on the justice of God (cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1-4). Perhaps the most perfect happiness of Heaven is impossible apart from some element of sorrow over the eternal loss of those who have rejected God’s grace. No doubt, however, many of the mysteries of life and of God’s ways in our individual lives will be more clearly understood, prompting us to join in His praise.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that there will be opportunity for growth in Heaven . . . not growth toward perfection, but growth in perfection. As a man, Jesus was indeed perfect. Yet Scripture tells us that He “grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man.” Scripture also tells us that one of the three virtues that will abide forever is hope (1 Cor. 13:13). And what is hope but the expectation of better and better things yet to come . . . the prospect of all for whom Heaven is our eternal home!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

George Bernard Shaw once said, “Heaven, as conventionally

conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore" {4}. The interesting thing about Shaw's statement is that he was right . . . at least when it comes to Heaven as it is "conventionally conceived!" {5} But the Bible informs us that the life that awaits us is not only "better" than anything we could ever dream of here, or even "much better," but according to the apostle Paul, "very much better" (Phil. 1:23)! Now we want to continue our consideration of some of these "very much better" things that await us in Heaven.

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and "dies" (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is "spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!"

The second "very much better" thing that will await us is the creation of a new heaven and earth in which we shall live with Christ forever. Jesus referred to this transformation of the creation as "the regeneration" (Matt. 19:28) the same term used to describe the new birth of a believer. Paul described it as the time when it will be "set free from its slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). In the Revelation we are told that in

the new creation there will be “no more sorrow, pain or death” (Rev. 21:4). And in Isaiah’s prophecy we read that the glories of the new creation will be so marvelous that “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17)! Not only will the sufferings of this present life fade in comparison to the glory of this new world order (Rom. 8:18), but even the most wonderful of life’s experiences will be so overshadowed by our new life that they will barely survive in our memory! When the apostle John was given a vision of life in the new creation, he was so overwhelmed that he had to be reminded to record what he was witnessing (Rev. 21:5), and to be assured twice that what he was beholding would really come to pass (Rev. 21:5; 22:6)!

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united worship of God, we will serve (Rev. 22:3) and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). The domain over which we will reign will no doubt encompass all of creation, for we’re told that for Christ “all things have been created” (Col. 1:16), and that with Him we will inherit “all these things” (Rev. 21:7)! Though in many respects there will be a certain continuity between our present and future life, many tasks and occupations of the present order will no longer be needed. The enterprises in which we will engage will be totally creative and productive far more fulfilling and exciting than anything we know on earth today!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? The Prospect of Heavenly Reward

So far in our discussion on Heaven we have noted aspects of our heavenly experience that will be true for all of us who will ultimately make it our home.

We want to focus now on the fact that there are some things about Heaven that will not be equally enjoyed by all.

Jesus on more than one occasion stated that not all who enter Heaven will enjoy its blessings to the same degree. Not that there will be any judgment or punishment for those who are heavenbound. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). But Jesus did say that in His kingdom "many who are first shall be last, and the last first" (cf. Matt. 19:30).

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ's presence "with confidence," or "to shrink away from Him in shame" (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a "stumbling" fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be "rewarded," or "suffer loss"; that it is possible to be "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the "fire" referred to here is a reference to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as "a flame of fire" (Rev. 1:14). "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for "bad" in this case refers not merely to what is "evil" but to what from God's perspective is "worthless." Not only will our "works" be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

What is the nature of the reward that may be won or lost? Many passages speak of our heavenly reward in terms of the responsibility with which we will be entrusted by God when we reign with Christ in the new heaven and new earth. In Jesus' parable of the talents, He spoke of rewarding those who had been faithful by putting them "in charge of many things" in His kingdom (Matt. 25:21-23). In another place He spoke of putting some of us in places of authority over cities in His kingdom (Luke 19:17,19). To those who had stood by Him in His

earthly trials, Jesus promised to place them “on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” in His future kingdom, as well as to seat them at His side at His table (Luke 22:28-30)! Not only would they be worthy of being entrusted with greater responsibility, but also capable of enjoying the closest fellowship with Christ!

In many passages heavenly rewards are likened to the “crowns” worn by victors in athletic contests. Whether literal or metaphorical, these crowns represent different aspects of our heavenly reward. The “crown of life” is promised to those who persevere under trial (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), the “crown of righteousness” to those who long for Christ’s return (2 Tim. 4:8), an “incorruptible crown” to those who exercise self control (1 Cor. 9:25), the “crown of rejoicing” to those who lead others to Christ (1 Thess. 2:19), and the “crown of glory” to those who serve unselfishly as spiritual leaders (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

The most important fact about our heavenly rewards is that they are based not on our position or ability, but on our faithfulness. Time and again Jesus told His followers that “he who is faithful in a little thing, will be faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10; 19:17).

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

Before we conclude, we want to think about just a few of the ways in which our life on earth should be impacted by what we believe about Heaven.

First, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the disappointments and sufferings of this life. D. A. Carson was right when he wrote: “There is nothing in Scripture to encourage us to think we should always be free from the vicissitudes that plague a dying world” [{6}](#). But one thing the hope of Heaven can do is help us to put the “dark side” of life in perspective. Paul wrote: “For I consider that the

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). The glory to come will be immeasurably greater than the depth of any sorrow we may know today!

But Scripture also tells us that our present sufferings actually play a role in preparing us for that glory to come! As the apostle put it: "For momentary, light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The very qualities and virtues that will fit us for Heaven are today being woven into our soul through the many afflictions of our present life . . . freeing us from the bonds of self-indulgence, creating in us a heart of compassion for others, and prodding us to draw ever closer to the One whose presence we shall enjoy for eternity to come.

Second, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the true nature of success. On every side we hear the message that the "good life" consists in the accumulation of material possessions, the acquisition of power, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Scripture does encourage us to enjoy the many good things of life with which we may be blessed (1 Tim. 6:17); but the hope of Heaven should remind us that this world and all that is in it is passing away, that its glory is for only a season (1 John 2:15-17), that we truly are "strangers and aliens" in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

That's why it exhorts us to set our minds and hearts on Heaven and to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3). God is urging us to turn aside from what in His eyes are "trivial pursuits" that end only in emptiness, and to devote ourselves to those ambitions that will yield fruit that will accompany us into the next world. When Jesus said to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness," He was encouraging us to make these things our highest priority in life.

Finally, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on death. The Scriptures nowhere teach that as believers we are

immune from or should deny the reality of the sorrow that death can bring. But in Christ, we share in His victory over death! We grieve, but we grieve not as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), rather as those who are certain of our reunion with loved ones who have gone before, of receiving a glorious body that will never weaken or decay, of entering a wonderful new life beyond our fondest dreams, and of forever being with the Lord!

At the end of his beloved "Narnia Tales" C. S. Lewis describes the events that transpire as the characters in his story enter Heaven: "(T)he things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." [\[7\]](#)

Notes

1. Gilmore, John. *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 175.
2. Sanders, J. Oswald. *Heaven Better By Far*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, p. 10.
3. Sanders, p. 19.
4. Stedman, Ray C. *God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1991, p. 334.
5. Stedman, 334.
6. Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 250.

7. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 183-184.

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Church's Intolerant Past Not a True Representation of Christianity

The Southern Baptist Convention recently made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raises a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place?

How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" become linked with human bondage, social apartheid and even today's racist militias?

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so I was saddened by the injustice I saw. A CBS documentary emphasized the Ku Klux Klan's use of the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in Durham, N. C. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their "longstanding policy of racial segregation." Thereafter, any Blacks present would be handed a note explaining the policy and asked not to return. I was outraged and left the church.

Some 19th-century ministers preached that slavery was a divine decree. In his book, "Slavery Ordained of God," Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God ... to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family." Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom, with Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthening their journeys to bypass Samaria. Once, a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus, who as a Jew surprised people by freely mixing with Samaritans, told a now famous story: The Good Samaritan aided a badly injured Jewish traveler who had been ignored by two passers-by, Jewish religious leaders. Which of the three was the "neighbor"? Obviously, the one who showed mercy.

The power of true faith to reconcile enemies was driven home to me in the '70s by Norton, Georgia state leader of the Black Student Movement, and Bo, a prejudiced White church member. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and his pals assaulted Norton. The animosity was mutual. Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed, while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo chose to reject his hypocrisy and follow his faith. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Historical and contemporary examples abound of true faith promoting reconciliation and opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, renounced his old ways, became a pastor and wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton encouraged his Christian friend William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule, in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

In South Africa in 1988, my heart ached as I saw impoverished Black townships and inequality falsely justified by religion. I also saw signs of hope. At a multiracial university student conference, Peter, a white Afrikaner, told me, "All my life,

I've been taught the races should be separate. But now because of my faith, I believe we can be one."

Sadly, his efforts to convince his friends back home were frustrating. "Maybe, you can love the Black man," they reluctantly conceded, "but you can't associate with him." Inner change often takes time and hinges on individual willingness.

Two years ago in Cape Town, radical Black terrorists sprayed a multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith's wife, Myrtle, died from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. In spite of his loss, he forgave the killers: "I prayed for those that committed the crime." The pastor explained, "Christian forgiveness doesn't mean that we condone what has happened or that we don't wish the law to take its course, but that we have no desire for vengeance. We're more determined than ever to contribute toward reconciliation and a peaceful future."

Former Vermont Sen. George Aiken said that if one morning we awoke to discover everyone was the same race, color and creed, we'd find another cause for prejudice by noon. Human hearts need changing.

A young African-American woman heard a speech on this theme in her sociology class at North Carolina State University. "All my life I've been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people," she noted. "Now, I realize those oppressors weren't really following Christ."

The Southern Baptists were right to renounce racism. Other institutions should take note. Racist policies, laws and yes—militias—need changing. But so do human beings. True Christianity does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it by changing human hearts.

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The Angel Quiz

Origin and Background of the Angels and Demons

The subject of this essay is angels. The material is presented in a quiz format because we have learned that many people enjoy testing their biblical knowledge in this way. Before going to the quiz, however, a few introductory observations about angels are in order.

Angels are referred to in 34 of the 66 books of the Bible. They are mentioned 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament.[{1}](#)

The presence of good angels, and evil ones (demons), are recognized in most of the world's religions. Angels are important figures in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, many Christian cults, and in the occult. "The history of various religions from the earliest times shows belief in Satan and demons to be universal...The great ethnic faiths of India, China, and Japan major in demonism, as well as the animistic religions of Africa, South America, and some islands...To an amazing degree, the history of religion is an account of demon-controlled religion, particularly in its clash with the Hebrew faith and later with Christianity."[{2}](#)

Currently interest in [angels](#) is very high in the United States, and many books and seminars are being offered on the

subject in an attempt to meet this heightened curiosity about angels.

Unfortunately most of these books and seminars are naive, at best, and more often than not, occultic in orientation. Now let's turn to the quiz.

1. What does the word angel mean?

The basic meaning of the word angel is "messenger." This is significant because a messenger is given a message by a higher person. Much of the contemporary romance with angels sees them as somewhat independent, if not totally autonomous, but a messenger is on a mission from someone higher, in this case from God...or Satan.

2. What are some of the other names used of angels?

Other terms used to describe angels are: ministers, hosts (the armies of God), chariots, watchers, sons of the mighty, sons of God, elohim (or sons of Elohim), holy ones, and stars.[\[3\]](#)

3. Are angels created or have they always been with God?

They were created by Christ (Col. 1:15-17; John 1:3).

4. When were they created?

They were created some time prior to the creation of the earth because Job 38:4-7 says that the sons of God (angels) sang with joy when the earth was created.

5. What about their appearance? How do angels look?

When angels appear on earth, they usually have the appearance of adult human males and are often described in the same passage both as men and as angels (Genesis 18:1-2). In Mark 16:5 an angel is described as a young man.

6. What do angels wear?

They are often reported to wear white (Acts 1:10), white robes (Mark 16:15), garments white as snow (Matt. 28:3), dazzling apparel (Luke 24:4), and shining garments (Acts 10:30).

7. Is it possible to encounter angels and not recognize them as angels?

Yes, in Hebrews 13:2 we are warned to show hospitality to strangers because “some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

8. Do angels really have wings?

Some angels don't have wings, or, at least, they don't manifest wings. Some clearly do. Cherubim are pictured as having four wings in Ezek. 1:5-12; 10:15; 11:22) and seraphim, as having six wings in Isaiah 6:2.

9. How do people react upon encountering angels?

The reaction varies. Sometimes the people are calm, but usually they experience fear, anxiety, emotional upheaval, terror, or the desire to worship the angels. Mary was greatly troubled at first (Luke 1:28-29); armed soldiers at the tomb shook with fear and became like dead men (Matt. 28:4); John, the author of Revelation, fell at the feet of the angel to worship (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).

Angels in the Old Testament

10. What caused the fall of the angels?

Satan, the leader of the fallen angels, was before his fall the highest of all created beings, but he was consumed with pride and rebelled against God (Ezek. 28:12-19; Isa. 14:12-14). He seduced a third of the angels to follow him in his rebellion (Rev. 12:4). These treacheries brought about his condemnation by God (1 Tim. 3:6) and the condemnation of the other rebelling angels.

11. When did they fall?

They fell some time after their own creation and before the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3).

12. Does Satan make his first appearance in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3?

No, a close reading of the account of man's fall in Genesis 3 reveals that Satan doesn't appear in the Garden of Eden though his influence is felt. Though his name isn't mentioned in the passage, he clearly inspired the actions of the serpent. Later, when God curses the serpent in verse 15, the last part of the curse is directed at Satan.

13. What do the opening verses of Genesis 6 have to do with angels?

There the sons of God took wives from among the daughters of men. One interpretation of the passage takes the sons of God to mean "angels" as the term is normally used. If this is so, then these angels are the evil angels who, in a very unique occurrence, cohabited with human females and produced unusual offspring. For this heinous sin these angels are kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day (Jude 6). See also 2 Peter 2:4-12.

14. How would evil angels profit by these actions?

Aside from sensual pleasure, the purpose seems to be that they intended to pollute and pervert the human line. Since Christ needed to be born into the human family and be fully human as well as fully God, a degenerate hybrid-humanity would have prevented Him from being our authentic representative on the cross. This is the reason, some hold, for God's sending the world-wide flood: to wipe out the polluted line and start over with Noah's family.

15. Do angels marry?

No, this is clearly stated in Mark 12:25. It is commonly believed that angels do not procreate and are not a race.[{4}](#) (See also Matt. 22:30.) Generally they are portrayed as sexless apart from the difficulties mentioned in question 13.

They are probably sexless in their basic nature but possibly able to assume a variety of forms, just as they are normally invisible but able to manifest themselves when they desire. (See also 2 Cor. 11:14-15.)

Angels are referred to in the Scriptures by masculine word forms though neuter forms were available. They appear on earth as human males, but there is the possibility of a female angel in Zechariah 5:9.

16. What news did the Lord and two angels give Abraham?

The Lord and two angels (also described as three men and the Lord and two men) announced that Sarah would have a son and that Sodom would be destroyed.

17. What happened when the two angels left and went to Sodom?

The men of that city, not knowing that they were angels, asked Lot to send them outside so they could have sexual relations with them. The angels blinded the men and warned Lot and his family to leave the city because Sodom was about to be destroyed (Gen. 19:1-29).

18. What famous incident involved Jacob and many angels?

In Genesis 28 Jacob had a dream of a ladder stretching from earth into heaven, and he saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder. In the dream God gave the land around Jacob to him and to his descendants and proclaimed "in you and in your descendants shall all the earth be blessed" (Gen. 28:10-22).

19. What is the meaning of this dream and promise?

It was a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic covenant and

indicated that the covenant would go through Jacob's line (not Esau's), that his descendants would be innumerable, and that wherever Jacob went God would be with him. It also looked forward to the coming of Christ through Jacob (Matt. 1:2).

20. What famous event involved Jacob and one angel? What happened?

Jacob, while fleeing from his brother Esau, wrestled all one night with an angel and persisted until the angel blessed him. The angel blessed him by changing his name from Jacob, meaning "trickster," to Israel, which means "he who persists with God." The angel also crippled one of Jacob's legs as evidence that the struggle had really occurred and was not merely a dream. The wrestling figure is described as a man and as God in Genesis 32:24-30 and as an angel in Hosea 12:4. So, the angel was probably the preincarnate Christ.

21. What Old Testament character was greeted by the angel of the Lord by this statement, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior"?

Gideon (Judges 6:11-12).

Angels in the Earthly Life of Christ

22. Angels were involved in Jesus birth in several ways. Can you identify all these events?

The angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19) announced the coming birth of John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus (Luke 1:5-25). Gabriel also announced to Mary, who was a virgin, the miraculous coming birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him not to put Mary away but to marry her because the child she was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was also told to name the child Jesus. When he woke up he did as the angel commanded him (Matt. 1:18-25). On the night of Jesus' birth, an angel announced the good news to shepherds keeping watch over their

flocks. Then “suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Luke 1:8-15).

23. Name the ways angels were involved in Jesus’ life and teachings?

After the coming of the magi, an angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod’s search for the child. After Herod’s death an angel again appeared to Joseph. He told Joseph to return to Israel (Matt. 2:19-20). When Christ was in the wilderness for 40 days, Satan was tempting Him and the angels were ministering to Him (Luke 4:1-2; Mark 1:13). Jesus taught about angels (Luke 16:22) and about Satan and his demons (Luke 10:17-20). He cast out demons, and He gave the disciples power over demons (Luke 9:1, 37-42). Christ was strengthened by an angel in Gethsemane the night He was taken prisoner (Luke 22:43).

24. Immediately after He stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Christ was met at the shore by a man who claimed to be demon possessed. What evidence was there that the man was demon- possessed?

He had been bound, but had superhuman strength and had broken away from all human restraints, even chains; he was naked and lived among the tombs, constantly gashing himself with stones while screaming and crying (Mark 5).

25. How many demons did he have? What happened to the demons?

He said he had a legion, meaning literally several thousand. This was probably a figure of speech, but he doubtless had many demons. The demons begged not to be sent out of the country; Christ then sent them into some pigs grazing on a nearby mountainside, and the pigs ran over the cliff into the sea. This is one more evidence of Christ’s total control over the demonic world (Mark 5).

26. How were angels involved after Christ’s death?

On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to visit the grave. Before they got there, “a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord had descended from heaven and rolled away the stone and sat upon it” (Matt. 28:2). Angels at the tomb announced that Christ was risen (Luke 24:4). Immediately after He ascended, two angels appeared and told the disciples that Jesus would return in the same manner that He had departed (Acts 1:10).

Angels in the Rest of the New Testament

27. What person was described as having the face of an angel?

Stephen, a young man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, was taken before the Sanhedrin and charged with blasphemy. He began to preach. Then “fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). His sermon, however, so angered the Council that they stoned him (Acts 7:1-60).

28. Who was taken by an angel on a missionary journey? What happened?

Philip was preaching in the villages of Samaria on his way to Jerusalem when an angel spoke to him and told him to go south on a road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. When he arrived the angel told him to approach an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. Philip explained the passage to the eunuch and baptized him upon hearing his statement of faith in Christ. After they come out of the water, the angel snatched Philip away and set him down in another city where he continued preaching the gospel (Acts 8:25-40).

29. What is the attitude of the heavenly angels toward God's plan of salvation?

There is great joy in heaven among the angels of God when a sinner repents and accepts Christ as Savior (Luke 15:10). They

are clearly intrigued by what God is doing and long to know more (1 Pet. 1:10- 12). They observe with great interest the behavior of the church. In fact in a passage about orderliness in the worship (Christ submitting to God, men submitting to Christ, and wives submitting to their husbands), Paul concludes by writing that women in church should have a symbol of authority on their heads because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:1-10). There are different theories about what all this means, but it seems clear that our behavior is to be respectful to the angels present and perhaps even instructive to them. Remember that the sin of the fallen angels began with Satan's pride, his unwillingness to submit and his desire for prominence.

30. What individual was freed from prison by an angel?

Simon Peter (Acts 12:3-10).

31. What did the angel do to free Peter?

He appeared in the cell, struck Peter's side to wake him, caused his chains to fall off his hands, then told him to get up and get dressed, and to follow him. They passed several guards without being seen, then they came to the gate of the city, and it opened by itself. Then the angel vanished.

32. Is it possible for an angel to say or teach things contrary to the Scriptures or to God's will?

Yes, in Galatians 1:8 Paul writes "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed."

33. Can angels be deceptive in other ways as well?

Yes, 1 Timothy 4:1 states: "in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons (fallen angels)."

34. What Gentile man was told by an angel to send for Simon

Peter?

Cornelius, a righteous, god-fearing Centurion who gave alms to the Jews (Acts 10).

35. Why did the angel direct Cornelius to send for Simon Peter come to Cornelius?

So Peter could tell Cornelius and his relatives and friends about salvation through Christ. And, so Simon Peter could see further evidence of how God was beginning a great wave of conversions among the Gentiles (Acts 9:32-11:30).

36. What happened?

The Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all those listening to Simon Peter's sermon. They began speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter had them all baptized.

Future State of the Angels and Demons

37. What future roles will the good angels have?

They are sometimes involved in punishing unbelievers (Acts 12:23). They will act as reapers toward the end of the age (Matt. 13:39), be involved in the judgments of the Tribulation (Rev. 8, 9, 16), and live forever with the believers of all ages in the New Jerusalem. [\[5\]](#)

38. Will the good angels judge the actions of their former comrades, the fallen angels?

No, believers in their glorified state will judge the fallen angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3). Christ will rule and the believers will rule under Him. Hebrews 2:5 states, "For He did not subject to angels the world to come."

39. What happens to the evil angels and Satan?

The evil angels and Satan will finally be judged by God who

will cast them into the lake of fire that burns forever (Luke 20:36; Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).

Notes

1. C. Fred Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 13.
2. Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1971), p. 10.
3. Dickason, pp. 58-61.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

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