

Christian Psychology: Is Something Missing?

The Church as a Healing Community

Worldviews shape the way we think. Psychology, once an outsider both to the sciences and most people's experience, has become a worldview for many people today. Evolutionary psychology, the view that our long evolution from animal to human has deeply imprinted all our behavior, is gaining acceptance on a rapidly widening scale. Psychology is often used to provide an explanation for everything from our "religious aspirations" to our behavior as consumers. How should a Christian view psychology, and what does psychology offer the believer? This essay will consider only one small part of the answer to those questions.

While specifically Christian counseling was once rare in the church, today it is a recognized part of many churches. As Christian counseling has become more widespread, some see it as the answer for the struggles that seem to plague most of us. The therapeutic worldview sees many of our problems and struggles in life as stemming from unresolved problems arising in childhood. The cataloging and diagnosis of psychological disorders has become widespread, both within the church and in the culture at large. Professional counselors are seen as the primary way of dealing with these disorders. How many of us, when faced with someone enduring an ugly divorce, or hounded by problems of self-guilt, or struggling with their self-image, don't think, "This person needs to see a counselor"?

Larry Crabb has done much to bring counseling into the American church. Having written books for more than 23 years, Crabb has always seen the church as being central in the counseling process. He has trained many of the counselors

working in churches today. He has written books, taught, founded schools, and lectured around the country on Christian psychology. He has successfully questioned the church's distrust of psychology.

Now Larry Crabb is asking a new question: Is the common, therapeutic model of Christian psychology really right? Should the church depend on mental health professionals to do all but minor, pat-on-the-back, words-of-cheer kinds of counseling? Is counseling really a matter of education and degrees and specialized training?

While being very clear that professional Christian counselors have an important role to play in the Christian community, Crabb is asking, Could we be depending on counselors too much? Could it be that God has given all believers more resources than we think to help one another deal with many of the troubles and struggles we face in daily life?

Going even deeper, Crabb asks the heretical question, Are psychological disorders really at the bottom of most of our struggles? "I conclude," says Crabb, "that we have made a terrible mistake. For most of the twentieth century, we have wrongly defined soul wounds as psychological disorders and delegated their treatment to trained specialists."[\(1\)](#) What he proposes in his book, *Connecting*, is both revolutionary and profound. In giving us new life in Christ, God has put in each of us the power to connect with other believers and to find the good God has put in them. We have the opportunity to heal most wounded souls. This is Larry Crabb's proposal. While he is still solidly behind professional counseling, he has come to see a broader place for healing within the context of Christian relationships. In this essay we will talk about what it means for two people to connect, and how God can use this connection to heal the deepest wounds of life and expose a beautiful vision of God's work in us.

What Is Connecting?

Some people seem to write a new book as often as most of us buy new shoes. And, like shoes, most of those books don't attract too much attention. But when well-known author Larry Crabb questions the very discipline that he helped establish, his book *Connecting* may cause more of a stir.

Christian psychology views human problems as primarily the result of underlying psychological disorders. We may be angry at a teenager's disobedience, but anger is only the symptom of problems buried within us. Stubborn problems may require deeper exploration of our thinking. Counselors are those people who have special training, enabling them to understand the various disorders we struggle with, and how to fix what's wrong.

In this book, Larry Crabb calls this whole picture into question. He describes the most common ways we react to people who are hurting and puts those reactions into two categories: moralistic and psychological. The moralist looks for what scriptures have been disobeyed, rebukes our disobedience, calls us to admit our sin and repent, and sees that we have some sort of accountability in the future. The psychologist listens to us, tries to find out what is wrong internally, and then helps us learn healthier ways of living. This process often takes months of self-exploration to find the roots of our problem, and to chart a course towards self-awareness and better ways of coping with the world.

Could there be another way for people to relate to each other when problems arise? Crabb's suggestion is a powerful one. Could it be, Crabb asks, that God has put within each of us His power, which, when we connect with another person, allows us to find the good that God has already put in them, and to release that good so that they can respond to the good urges God has placed there?

This is the main premise of the book *Connecting*. Coming straight to the point, Crabb says, “The center of a forgiven person is not sin. Neither is it psychological complexity. The center of a person is the capacity to connect.”[\(2\)](#) The gift of salvation gives us the Holy Spirit, Who allows us first to connect with God the Father, and then, on a new and deeper level, with each other. But what is connecting?

Crabb uses an analogy to the Trinity to make his point clear. The Trinity, Crabb writes, is “an Eternal Community of three fully connected persons.”[\(3\)](#) They have delighted in each other for eternity, there is no shadow of envy or minute bit of jealousy between them, and they love to do what is best for each other. Since God made us in His image, we too can enjoy one another, but we must rely on the power of God in us to show us what is good in the other person.

Connecting is so powerful, Crabb says, because it requires that we look past the surface of people and see the new creation God has already begun. Connecting with someone else requires us to look at what a person could be, not just what he is right now. With God’s insight, we look beyond the small amount God may already have done and ask God for a vision of what this person could be like. Connecting finds the spark in someone else and is excited about what it could flame into.

Is professional counseling unnecessary? Of course not, says Crabb. But connecting is a powerful way God uses us to bring out His good in others. What keeps us from doing this more?

What Keeps Us From Connecting?

If connecting is what God has made us for, and if this is what the Holy Spirit equips us to do, then why don’t more of us connect with one another? Larry Crabb’s answer is developed around four analogies. We tend to be either city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers.

City builders are those who know what resources they have and how to use them. They know their strengths, and they have a solid sense of their adequacy to meet whatever lies ahead. City builders want to be in control, and fear that they might be found inadequate. City builders have a hard time connecting with someone else because they are looking for affirmation of themselves, not what is good in another. They can work together with other people towards a common goal, but only if it increases their sense of adequacy.

Martha Stewart, for example, has built an empire on feeding people's desire to be adequate, able to handle any situation. She is in control of her kitchen, her house, her yard, her life. And she is the one who will show us how to bring our lives under control.

God has created us with a desire for good. We want to please others, we want to live in peace, we want to have everything work out right. And in heaven it will. But we are not in heaven, and too often we try to insulate ourselves from the messiness of the world around us. City builders depend on their own resources to bring a sense of control into their lives. Their adequacy comes from themselves and what they can accomplish. But this blocks them from depending on God. God encourages us to seek peace with all men (Rom. 12:18), but at the same time we must realize that following Christ is a path of difficulty, not ease (2 Tim. 3:12). We are being prepared for perfection, but we are not to expect it here on earth. God has prepared a perfect city for us, but we are not to try to create it on our own now (Heb. 11:13-16).

Fire lighters are like those people described in Isaiah 50:10-11. They walk in darkness, but rather than trust in God to guide them by His light, they light their own torches, and set their own fires to see by. Fire lighters, Crabb says, are those people who must have a plan they know will work. Their demand of God is the pragmatist's "Tell me what will work!" Fire lighters trust and hold closely to their plans, so

connecting is hard for them because it would require them to trust God and not know what might happen next. Connecting requires us to give up our plans and expectations so that we can recognize and enjoy God's plans. We can either trust God or trust our own plans, but we cannot do both. It is not wrong to plan, but we must be willing to give up our plans when Jesus does not fit into them in the way that we want. As C.S. Lewis describes Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: "It's not as if he were a tame Lion." [\(4\)](#)

Have you ever known people whose primary efforts in life were directed towards protecting themselves and their children from any difficulties? When safety is your top priority, then you have become a *wall whitewasher*, Crabb says. Wall whitewashers build flimsy walls of protection around themselves and their worlds, and then whitewash them to make them appear stronger than they really are. These people want protection from whatever they fear. They are sure that their lives of dedication to the Lord are a protection from major problems. "Wall whitewashers cannot welcome tribulations as friends. . . Character isn't the goal of a wall whitewasher. Safety is." [\(5\)](#)

Many people who feel God's calling in their lives, also assume that God will take care of them and of their families. And He will, but not always in the way that we imagine. As we raise our children and watch the terrible struggles that seem to overcome so many other young people, we may feel that at least God will protect our own children from such affliction. But if our trust is that our serving the Lord is protecting our family, then we have built up a false sense of security. We are trying to cover our own uncertainty about the future with the whitewash of our own good deeds. God builds us up and shows us our need to depend on Him alone in our tribulations, but we often want to hide ourselves and protect our families from the very misfortunes that God wants to use to strengthen us. We are whitewashing a failing wall when we try to put up a

hedge around ourselves and our families, sure that God will protect us from trouble. Everything that happens in our lives has come through God first, has been "Father-filtered," as someone once said. But we must depend on the Lord in all circumstances, not just when we feel protected. God loves us perfectly, but His desire is to give us His character, not to protect us from any difficulty. That is why, as James says, we are to greet tribulations as friends, and not with fear.

Crabb's fourth class of people who thwart God's purpose in connecting are those he calls *well diggers*. The image comes from Jeremiah 2, where God marvels at the broken, pitiful wells that the Israelites make instead of coming to Him for real, unlimited water. Well diggers are looking for satisfaction on their terms, and they want to escape pain at any cost. The well digger asks, "Do I feel fulfilled?" If the answer is no, then he renews his quest for something that will give even a moment's pleasure. We judge drug addicts harshly, but what about needing to have a certain position to feel good, or driving a certain kind of car to prove we're reaching our goals?

Well diggers also are characterized by something that marks our whole first-world culture: the desire for satisfaction now. Well diggers dig their own wells because it often seems faster than the way God is providing water. We want to be filled, and we want it immediately. We live in a fast-everything world. We stand around the microwave oven, wondering why it takes so long to heat a cup of water. Or, more seriously, we wonder why God is taking so long to bring along the right woman or man, so we find our own ways to satisfy our desires, whether in pornography, or cheap sex, or relationships we know can't last. We want to be satisfied, and if God seems slow, we find our own satisfaction any way we can.

God plans for eternity, and builds to last forever. But it takes time, and patience. If we fulfill our own desires, we

will be like the Samaritan woman at the well: we will soon thirst again. But if we allow God to provide for our thirst, He fills us with living water, and we are filled in ways we could never have known otherwise.

Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall washers, or well diggers, we will never be able to deeply connect with another person until we kill these urges of the flesh, and allow God to strengthen our spirit. What will help us connect with other people?

Finding What God is Doing in Others

To connect with another believer, we “discover what God is up to and join Him in nourishing the life He has already given.”[\(6\)](#) This is why Larry Crabb sees connecting as central to the Gospel. To connect with another Christian is to let the power of the Holy Spirit in you, find the good that God has planted in the spirit of another believer. It requires us to get past our flesh, which Paul instructs us to crucify (Gal. 5:24), so that we can be alive to the Spirit, the one Who makes connection possible. Connecting with someone else is a triumph of the Spirit over my own fleshly desires to control my own life (being a city builder), to create a plan I know will work (fire lighter), to protect myself against the uncertainties of life (wall whitewasher), and to find my own ways to feel good when I want to (well digger). To connect with a fellow believer I must see what God sees in him or her, not just what I can see.

So how do we see as God sees? God’s forgiveness of us provides a clue. Does God forgive me because I am such a nice fellow? No. Does God forgive me because I have such a good heart? No. Am I forgiven because I will always do the right thing in the future? No. God forgives me because He sees Jesus’ death in my place. It must be the same when I look at a fellow Christian. I must see him or her as someone whom God cared enough to die for, and as someone worth the incredible price that Christ

paid on the cross.

Just as God looks past what is bad in my flesh to what He is creating in my spirit, so I must learn to look at other people and find the good that God is working on in them.

Have you ever heard a child learning to play a musical instrument? We don't just listen to the noises coming from the violin or piano or drums. We listen to what is behind the music—the effort, the intensity, the desire to do better, the willingness to work. We listen for the spark that might indicate that this child really connects to music. That is just what we need to look for in one another: the sparks of eternity God has placed in each one of us. We need to look for what God is doing in our friends that can delight us, and make us “jump up and down with excitement” at how wonderfully God is remaking them.

If we would truly connect with someone else, we must also be putting to death the flesh and feeding the spirit. Larry Crabb goes back to an old Puritan phrase, “mortifying the flesh,” to describe what we are to do as we discover urges of the flesh rising up in us. As Crabb emphatically writes: “The disguise [of the flesh] must be ripped away, the horror of the enemy's ugliness and the pain he creates must be seen, not to understand the ugliness, not to endlessly study the pain, but to shoot the enemy.” [\(7\)](#) This is an ongoing war, one we will fight until we are home with Jesus, but alongside this battle to “crucify the flesh” (Gal. 5:24) we must also feed the Spirit. By this Crabb means that we are, as a community of believers, to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). As we put to death the flesh, we are indeed made alive in the Spirit (Rom. 8:10-14).

Discerning a Vision for Others

Larry Crabb's book *Connecting* has two subtitles. The first subtitle is “Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships.”

Earlier, we saw how we are healed as we allow Christ to sweep away all of our own methods of dealing with life. Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers, these are all ways that we try to manage life. Jesus does not ask us to manage our lives. Instead, as a father might take his son through a crowded mall, God asks us to take His hand, and let Him guide us to where He chooses. The urges we need to kill are the very urges that whisper in our ears that we must take care of ourselves.

Remarkably, as we abandon our own techniques for survival, and let God use our lives in His own way, we also find that we can approach others much more openly and honestly. We are free to love people for who they are, not what they can do for us. And this opens up what is one of Larry Crabb's most important ideas. When we look at others the way God does, we begin to see what He is doing to make them new and incredible creations, just as He is doing for us.

The second subtitle for *Connecting* is "A Radical New Vision." It is certainly radical when one of the leading voices for Christian psychology suggests that lay Christians themselves can deal with many of the personal problems they often refer to counselors. But the radical view he has most in mind is a new way we can relate to and view one another.

Crabb's challenge is for us to kill the bad urges in ourselves so that we are able to begin seeing and hearing what God is doing in other people. This will not be just a warm feeling. We discern visions for a person's life; we do not create them.

When a doctor announces "It's a girl!" he is not making her a girl, he is announcing what is already the case. In the same way, Crabb writes, we are, by prayer, listening, and reading God's Word, to discern what God is doing in someone's life and then announce it. And the process of seeing what God is doing in someone's life may not be easy.

Larry Crabb's vision for the church is that we will become communities of people who care desperately about one another, so much that we will let down our guard. People can truly know us, and we can see into them. In this process of connecting with a few other people, we will see God take the power of His Holy Spirit, and use that power to see what another person could be. As we walk with the Lord, and grow in godly wisdom, He enables us to see the good in other believers, and to encourage that good in a way that gives that person a vision of why she is here. It is this vision of who we could be in Christ which can transform each of us. But we must be willing to die daily to who we are on our own, and arise daily to do and say the things that God desires us to do and say. Are you ready for a radical new vision? It will fill your whole world with the power God has put in you to release the good He has put in others. What a calling of hope!

Notes

1. Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), p. 200.
2. Crabb, 38.
3. Crabb, 53.
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 138.
5. Crabb, 121.
6. Crabb, 49.
7. Crabb, 91.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

There is a sense among many people today that the modern era, both in terms of technical and financial prosperity, as well as personal spiritual well-being, is over. There appears to be a general malaise among many people today, and a certain uneasy feeling that the twentieth-century has entered a new phase. Additionally, most believe that this new phase is not a very good one. Many diverse new “communities” such as feminists, gays, pro-choice advocates, pro-life advocates, conservatives, liberals, and various other groups, both religious and non-religious, make up the global village we now live in. These various groups are frequently at odds with one another and more often than not there is a breakdown in communication. This breakdown can be attributed to the lack of a common frame of reference in vocabulary and, more importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in

which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Darwinian naturalism has been one of the chief philosophical revolutions that has gripped the world. And, although few at the time had any idea how much Darwin's ideas would permeate the culture, no one today doubts the far reaching results of that revolution. The Christian church was not ready for the Darwinian revolution, and thus this philosophy was able to gain a foothold (and later a death grip) on every aspect of modern life, both in academic and popular circles. For decades after the revolution, many church leaders thought it unimportant to answer Darwin and said little or nothing about the new philosophy. Most Christians were, therefore, not equipped to provide coherent answers and were too late in entering the debate. The result is that most of our public schools and universities, and even our political lives, are dominated by the erroneous assumption that Darwinian naturalism is scientifically true and that creationism is fictitious.

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is

ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

Historians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and many others use the terms *modern*, *premodern*, and *postmodern* to help them navigate through large pieces of time and thought. In order to understand what these very helpful terms are used for, we will try to understand the premodern period first. The term *premodern* is used to describe the period before the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The premodern period is often referred to as the precritical period—a time before the criteria of truth became so stringent. The premodern period ends somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the high part of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The major thing one should remember is that, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, the Western world was changing forever, and this would have far reaching impact on every aspect of life, especially religion.

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and handwritten texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral

codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that someone had just told you that the world was created by a being that you could not detect with your five senses and that He had left a written communication about His will for your life. You would look around at the world that you lived in, and you would decide if the stories that were told to you explained the world and were reasonably believable. This method for determining truth is called the *correspondence method of truth*. If the story being told corresponds to the observable phenomenon in the world, then the story is accepted as truth. There is also a *coherence method of truth* in operation during this period. The coherence theory would add to the correspondence theory the idea that all of the individual stories told over a period of time should not contradict one another. These two forms of determining whether something is true or not were the primary means of evaluation for many centuries.

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

The Advent of the Modern

We must now leave our discussion of the premodern period and turn our attention to the beginning of the modern period. Some see the modern era as beginning in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; others, however, believe it began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A main tenet of *modernism* is that human reason, armed with the scientific method, is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge about the universe. During the Renaissance men began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of the earth in ever increasing ways. It was a time marked by invention and discovery that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism, or a high confidence in mankind. The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where better telescopes and microscopes allowed men to unlock the secrets of the universe. The unlocking of these secrets led to the initial impression that the universe, and the human body, resembled machines and could be understood in mechanistic terms.

In the eighteenth century the progress of science accelerated so rapidly that it appeared as if science would soon be able to explain everything. Many believed that there were no limits to the power of human reason operating with the data from sense perception. In contrast to the truth of the oral tradition in the premodern era, the modern period accepted as truth only that which could be proven to be true. Many of the philosophers and theologians of the modern period sought to devise a rational religion, a faith that could incorporate all of the considerations and discoveries of the new science.

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how

doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence to the belief that science and the scientific method would one day yield a utopian society. It is easy to see how the optimism of this period became almost intoxicating to many. The so-called-truths of religion were quickly being cast aside in favor of the new, and better, truths found by science. Examples found in advertising may be helpful. A company that wished to sell a car or a pair of tennis shoes would appeal to the scientific truths of their product. That is, a company would attempt to persuade a potential buyer into purchasing its product based on the fact that it was the best item obtainable. Add to this scientific furor, the advancement of Darwinian naturalism, and it is easy to see how religious claims seemed like quaint, antiquated beliefs for many people. The modern period culminated in arrogance concerning human abilities and human reason. It proposed a world created without any assistance from God. The modern period differs from the premodern in its rejection of the supernatural or the transcendent which is based largely on the belief that religious truth claims are different than scientific truth claims. According to many, truth itself had changed.

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three

centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

Modernity may be understood as a time when our best philosophers, theologians, and scientists attempted to make sense out of the world based on the belief in objective reality. One of the central tenets of the era we live in (the postmodern period) is that there is no such thing as objective truth. In fact, the new trend in postmodern thought is to embrace, affirm, and live with philosophical, theological, and even scientific chaos. Earlier we used an example from advertising; suggesting that products were marketed based on their claims to be superior to what a competitor might offer. If we use this example again, postmodern methodology appeals more to a person's feelings than to his or her sense of factual truth. Cars, tennis shoes, and other products are marketed based on image. The best car is not necessarily the one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that

any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

Furthermore, Christians are expected to tolerate contradicting truth claims and to look the other way if certain ethical behaviors (abortion, homosexuality, etc.) do not suit their tastes. The current postmodern condition is only in the early stages of development, not even a half a century old, and yet its devastating effects have penetrated every aspect of our lives. Christians largely responded too late to the threats of Darwinism, and now the destructive effects of that movement are evident to anyone in the Christian community. Postmodernism, and its companion rampant philosophical relativism, should be among the foremost concerns of any Christian who wishes to engage his or her culture and ensure that the gospel of Christ has a fertile context in which it can take root and grow in the future.

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it

is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

When she was pressed on her beliefs concerning reality, the inconsistencies of her philosophy were evident. She stated that everything was a matter of opinion or one's personal perspective. When asked if this belief extended to physical reality, she said it did. She said that a person could look at something in such a way as to alter reality.

The example of the existence or nonexistence of her car was raised. She said that if she believed that her car was not in the parking lot and if another person believed that it was, it could be possible that it actually existed for one person and not for the other. When one first hears something like this, it sounds as if the person who maintains this position is joking, and could not possibly mean for us to take him or her seriously. However, the sad and frightening truth is that this individual is very serious.

This young woman is representative of a large part of our Western culture, men and women who tend to think unsystematically. The result of this way of thinking is that people often hold ideas that are logically inconsistent and contradict each other. The result is that persons professing to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or even atheists are given equal degrees of credibility. Truth has become a function of personal preference, not correspondence to objective reality.

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is

often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God's existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

Bibliography

1. Allen, Diogens. *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1989.
2. Anderson, Leith. *A Church for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1992.
3. Barna, George. *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need To Know About Life in the Year 2000*. Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990.
4. McCallum, Dennis. *The Death of Truth*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996.
5. Evans, C. Stephen, & Westphal, Merold. *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.
6. Lundin, Roger. *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian*

Faith and the Postmodern World. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.

7. Oden, Thomas C. *Agenda for Theology, After Modernity . . . What?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990.

8. Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

9. Veith, Jr., Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture.* Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994.

10. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Reason Within The Bounds of Religion.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

The Christian Mind

The Need for a Christian Mind

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17)(1) This familiar admonition was first spoken by John the Baptist and soon after it was echoed by Jesus. The phrase is certainly worthy of a great deal of attention; it provides a lot of food for thought. For the moment, though, let’s concentrate on the first word: *Repent*. This expression is a central portion of the doctrines concerning sin and salvation. Literally it refers to a *change of mind*. It does not mean that one is to be sorry for some action. Thus, the first hearers were admonished to realize that they were

in need of radical change before a holy God, beginning with their minds. They were to turn from sin to God by changing their thinking. Certainly the same holds true for us. Most of us are in need of reminders that lead us back to one of the crucial aspects of our salvation: repentance, or a change in our thinking. In addition, we should couple such memories with the realization that our changed minds should always be alive to God. To paraphrase Kepler's famous phrase, we are to "think God's thoughts after Him." Since the Christian life is all-inclusive, the mind is included.

But, some may ask, do we actually have a mind? Current research and thought in the fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology concludes that we are much too free with the word *mind*. Perhaps we should get used to making reference to the brain, rather than the mind.

"Some neuroscientists are beginning to suspect that everything that makes people human is no more than an interaction of chemicals and electricity inside the labyrinthine folds of the brain."(2) E.O.

Wilson, the father of what is called sociobiology, proposes that we can determine an ethical system based on scientifically observable evidence. He writes, "The empiricist argument holds that if we explore the biological roots of moral behavior, and explain their material origins and biases, we should be able to fashion a wise and enduring ethical consensus."(3) Thus, ethics are not to be found external to physical reality; there is no mind through which we can respond ethically. It seems that Wilson and those who are like-minded believe "the mind is headed for an ignoble fate.

Just as the twinkle of stars was reduced to nuclear explosions, and life itself to biochemical

reactions, so the brain may one day be explained by the same forces that run the rest of the universe.”(4)

Such perspectives should come as no surprise if we are aware of the permeation of a naturalistic worldview in both the physical and social sciences. The Christian, though, is not relegated to this type of reduction. A biblical worldview makes it clear that we are more than physical beings; we are also non-physical beings made in God’s image. As a popular joke from the nineteenth century says:

What’s the matter?

Never mind.

What is mind?

No matter.(5)

The truth of the joke should not be lost on those of us who claim to be followers of Christ. We should realize the importance of cultivating Christian minds. As the great statesman Charles Malik stated, “As Christ is the Light of the World, his light must shine and be brought to bear upon the problem of the formation of the mind.”(6)

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 1)

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isa. 1:18). Imagine you are in a courtroom. You are the defense attorney; the prosecutor is God Himself. He has just invited you, Judah’s attorney, to engage in debate concerning the case at hand which happens to focus on the crimes of your client. Indeed, He wants the two of you to *reason together*. That is the scenario

presented in this famous passage from the first chapter of Isaiah. God was inviting Judah to debate a case in court.(7) What a remarkable idea! And what a stunning statement concerning the importance of the mind. God was calling upon His people to use their minds to see if they could engage Him in debate concerning their sins.

In a time when the mind appears to be denigrated at every hand, such a passage should serve to reawaken us to the importance of using the minds God has given us. After all, the Bible, which most Christians claim to be the very word of God, calls the mind to attention throughout its pages. As J.P. Moreland states, "If we are going to be wise, spiritual people prepared to meet the crises of our age, we must be a studying, learning community that values the life of the mind."(8) Let's begin such studying and learning by considering some of what the Bible says about the ungodly and rebellious mind, and then the godly mind.

First, the ungodly mind is described in terms that are sobering. When we apply these phrases to the culture around us, we can better understand why what we see and hear disturbs us. For example, Romans 1:18-28 describes what one scholar called "The Night." Here are some of the ways unbelievers' minds are depicted in this dark passage:

- Suppressing the truth
- Rejecting God
- Foolish speculations
- Foolish hearts
- Professing wisdom
- Exchanging God for a counterfeit
- Lusting hearts
- Exchanging truth for a lie

- Worshipping the creature
- Degrading passions
- Exchanging the natural for the unnatural
- Committing indecent acts
- Depraved minds

Another somber statement about the ungodly way of thinking is found in 2 Corinthians 4:4: “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Perhaps you have had conversations with unbelievers that were characteristic of such “blindness.” The person with whom you were talking just didn’t see it as you attempted to share the truth of Christ. Such responses should not surprise us.

A foolish mind also is described frequently in Scripture. Jeremiah 4:22 is a strong indictment of those who know the things of God, but foolishly reject them:

*For My people are foolish,
They know Me not;
They are stupid children,
And they have no understanding.
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know.*

Hosea 4:6 shows the result of God’s reaction when His people reject the truth:

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest.*

These ancient proclamations could not be more contemporary. May we heed their warnings!

The Scriptures and the Mind (Part 2)

“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). When the apostle Paul wrote these words, he was very aware of the need for a Christian mind. Philosophical speculations abounded in his time, just as in our time. Thus he described the Christian’s mental responsibility in terms of warfare. The Christian mind is active—it enters the battle; it is filled with the knowledge of God—it is prepared for battle; it puts all things under the lordship of Christ—it follows the only true commander into battle. And that battle has been won innumerable times, even in the minds of brilliant people. “One of the most astonishing and undeniable arguments for the truth of [Christianity] . . . is the fact that . . . some of the most subtle of human intellects have been led to render submission to the Saviour.”(9) The Bible contains many such insights into the nature of a Christian mind. We will consider two of these.

Reason is a term that is descriptive of the Christian mind. This does not mean that a Christian is to be a rationalist, but rather he is to use reason based on the reason of God found in Scripture. For example, on one of several occasions Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus to test Him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus responded by referring to their ability to discern signs of certain kinds of weather. Then He said, “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3)? Obviously He was noting how people use reason to arrive at conclusions, but the Christian mind would

conclude the things of God. The book of Acts indicates that the apostle Paul used reason consistently to persuade his hearers of the truth of his message. Acts 17:2-3 states that "according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths *reasoned* [emphasis added] with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." For two years in Ephesus Paul was "reasoning [emphasis added] daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). In light of the fact that our contemporary world attempts to reject reason, such examples should spur us to hold out for the possibility of reasonable dialogue with those around us. After all, those who reject reason must use reason to reject reason.

If the Christian mind is characterized by reason, such reason must be founded upon knowledge from God. Upon reflection of their conversation with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, two of the disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us" (Luke 24:32)? The word *hearts* in this passage refers to both moral and mental perception. In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, "we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28). And in his Ephesian letter he wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" (Eph. 1:18-19). May this beautiful prayer apply to us as we consider how to use our God-given minds!

Mandates for the Mind

“AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR

SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” (Mark 12:30). These words

have echoed for thousands of years, beginning with Moses and leading to Jesus. They contain the

first of what I call *Mandates for the Mind*: Strive to Know God. To love someone we must

know him or her. In the case of my wife, for instance, it would have been absurd to declare that I

loved her before ever meeting her. My love for her implies an intimate knowledge *about*

and knowledge *of* her. In the same manner we are to strive both to know *about* God

and to *know* Him intimately. Our minds are crucial to this mandate. It is my contention that

one of the major problems in contemporary Christianity is that too many of us are attempting know

God without using our minds to investigate what He has told us of Himself in Scripture.

The second mandate is that the Christian mind should strive for truth. “Jesus therefore was saying

to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of

Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” (John 8:31-32). Abiding in

His word implies a continual dedication to using the mind to search the Scriptures, the place where

His truth is written.

The third mandate pertains to maturity. Romans 12:2 declares:

“And do not be conformed to this

world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God

is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." It is pertinent to note that the words *conformed*, *transformed*, and *prove* refer to continuous action. Thus, the Christian mind is to be characterized by continuous development toward maturity. Hebrews 5:14 refers to Scripture as "solid food" as the writer describes the mature mind. He then asserts that the Christian is to "press on [continually] to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). Such maturity is a strategic need in the contemporary church.

The fourth mandate involves proclaiming and defending the faith. The maturing Christian mind will actively engage the minds of those around him. For example, Paul modeled this while in Athens:

"[H]e was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him" (Acts 17:17-18). Paul proclaimed and defended the truth of the gospel in the synagogue with his own people, among the populace, and even with the intellectual elite of the time. Such encounters are easily duplicated in our day.

The fifth mandate refers to the need for study. Philippians 4:8 states: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Note the final phrase: "let your mind dwell," a clause indicative of the need for concentration, or study. The phrase also includes a command that such study is to be continuous. We are to ponder, or think

on the things of God.

Applying the Christian Mind

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

This exhortation from the book of James includes the last of our *Mandates for the Mind*.

That is, the Christian mind should be applied; what is in the mind should flow to the feet.

It would be easy to state that such a mandate applies to all of life and let that suffice, but specific examples can help us focus on how this works. Thus we will focus on three contrived stories.

Our first story involves a fellow we will call Billy. Billy is an excellent softball player. Three nights per week he plays for his company team. He has a reputation as a fierce competitor who will do virtually anything to win. He also has a volatile temper that explodes in ways that embarrass his family and teammates. On some occasions he even has had shoving and cursing bouts with opposing players. Each Sunday, and even on other occasions, he attends a well-known church in his city. One Sunday his pastor shared an exceptional sermon based on 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Upon hearing this message, he suddenly realized that softball games could not be isolated from his commitment to Christ. Whether in his business, his family, or his softball games he needed to stop and think: if he is a temple of God, all of life is a sacred task. His life, including softball, was never the same.

The second story focuses on a woman named Sally. She is a

teacher in a public elementary school who is also a young Christian. Her new life in Christ has invigorated her to the point that she is beginning to think of ways she can share her joy with her students. She decides that at every opportunity she will encourage the children to discover the wonder of life. As she guides them through science, she expresses awe as they investigate the simplest flower, or the profundity of the solar system. As she discusses arithmetic she encourages them to realize the beauty of logical order in numbers. As she reads stories to them she gently emphasizes the amazing concept of human imagination. In these ways and others Sally begins to realize the excitement of using her mind for God's glory. In addition, she soon finds that she is having conversations with her students that give her opportunities to share the One who is guiding her.

Our third story concerns Steven, a businessman and father of an eight-year-old boy. Steven has come to the realization that his son, Jimmy, spends most of his time either watching television or playing computer games. So he begins to consider ways to stimulate Jimmy's thinking. Since he also wants to see Jimmy come to faith in Christ, Steven suggests that they read C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* together. Soon, the two of them are delighting in these tales, and Steven finds ways to discuss the spiritual metaphors in Lewis' classic fantasies.

These stories may not apply directly to your life at this time. But, hopefully they will stimulate a broader understanding of how your mind can be used for God's glory within the routines of life.

Notes

1. All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Version.
2. Sharon Begley, John Carey, and Ray Sawhill, "How the Brain Works," *Newsweek* (7 February 1983), 40.
3. Edward O. Wilson, "The Biological Basis of Morality," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1998), 54.
4. Begley, 47.
5. Quoted in Begley.
6. Charles Habib Malik, "Your Mind Matters; Cultivate It," *Active Christians in Education* (January 1981), 1A.
7. R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 377.
8. J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997), 39.
9. R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 135.

Art and the Christian

How should Christians think about art from a framework that starts with the Bible? The concept that people are made in God's image is reflected in the fact and the content of the art we produce.



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

Art in our Lives

Where are you as you read this? You may be sitting in an office, reclining in a lounge chair at home, lounging in your back yard, sitting at a desk in your dorm room, or any other of a number of scenarios. Consider for a moment if art is part of your consciousness. If you are sitting in an office, is art anywhere within your vision? If you are reclining in a lounge chair, does the furniture have an artistic dimension? If you are lounging in your back yard, can the word art be used to describe any facet of what you see? If you are in your dorm room, are you listening to music that is art?

If I had the pleasure of dialoguing with you in regard to these questions, no doubt we would have a very interesting conversation. Some of you may say, "No, art doesn't describe anything I see at the moment." Or, some of you may state, "I haven't thought of this before. You'll have to give me more time for reflection." Others may assert, "I only think of art within museums, concert halls or other such places that enshrine our art." Others may say, "Yes, art is very much a part of my daily life." But since I can't dialog with you in order to know what you are doing at the moment, and I certainly cannot see what you see, let me tell you where I am and what I see as I write these comments. I am sitting in my study at my desk while I am listening to the music of Bach. I see a clock on one of the bookshelves, a hand-painted plate I purchased in the country of Slovenia, a framed poem given to

me by my daughter, several chairs, two floor lamps, a mirror with a bamboo frame, two canoe paddles I bought in the San Blas islands off the coast of Panama, a wooden statue I purchased in Ecuador, and a unique, colorful sculpture that was made by my son. As I mention these things, perhaps you are attempting to imagine them. You are trying to “see” or “hear” them and in so doing there are certain of these items you may describe as art. Your first response may be to say that the music of Bach, the hand-painted Slovenian plate, or the Ecuadorian statue can be described as art. But what about the chair in which I am sitting, the desk, the bookshelves, the chairs, or the lamps? Better yet, what about such items that are found where you live? Are they art?

Such questions are indicative of the challenges we face when we begin to consider the place of art in our lives. As an evangelical Christian I can state that art and the aesthetic dimensions of life have not received much attention within my formal training. Only through my own pursuit have I begun to think about art with a Christian worldview. And I have found my experience is similar to what many have experienced within the evangelical community. Too often we have tended to label art as inconsequential or even detrimental to the Christian life.

Actually, there is nothing new about this. Our spiritual forefathers debated such issues. They were surrounded by Greek and pagan cultures that challenged them to give serious thought to how they should express their new beliefs. Art surrounded them, but could the truth of Christ be expressed legitimately through art? Could Christians give positive attention to the art of non-Christians? In light of such struggles it is my intention to encourage you to give attention to some of the basic elements of a Christian worldview of art and aesthetics in this essay. I believe you will find that our discussion can have significant application in your life.

Art and Aesthetics

Several years ago I was having dinner with a group of young people when our conversation turned to the subject of music. During the discussion I made a comment about how I believe there is a *qualitative* difference between the music of Bach and that of a musician who was popular among Christians at the time of our discussion. When one of the group at our table heard this, he immediately responded in anger and accused me of flagrant prejudice and a judgmental spirit. Even though I attempted to elaborate my point, the young man had determined that I was an elitist and would not listen any longer.

This incident serves as a reminder that one of the most prevalent ways of approaching art is to simply say that "beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder." The incident also serves to show that concepts of "good" and "bad," or "beautiful" and "ugly," or other adjectives, are part of our vocabulary when we talk of art. This is true whether we believe such terms apply only to individuals or everyone. The vocabulary pertains to a field of philosophy called aesthetics.

All of us deal with aesthetics at various times in our lives, and many of us incorporate aesthetic statements in daily conversations. For example, we may say, "That was a *great* movie." Or, "That was a *terrible* movie." When we make such statements we normally don't think seriously about how such terms actually apply to what we have seen. We are stating our opinions, but those opinions are usually the result of an immediate emotional response. The challenge comes when we attempt to relate *qualitative* statements about the movie as part of a quest to find universal guidelines that can be applied to all art. When we accept this challenge we begin to explain why some artists and their art is great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile.

Aesthetics and Nature

Perhaps one of the clearest ways to begin to understand the aesthetic dimension of our lives is to consider how we respond to nature. Have you ever heard anyone say, "That's an *ugly* sunset." Probably not, but surely you have heard the word *beautiful* applied to sunsets. And when you hear the phrase "beautiful sunset" you probably don't hear an argument to the contrary. Usually there is a consensus among those who see the sunset: it is beautiful. From a Christian perspective those who are there are offering a judgment concerning both the "artist" and the "art." Both the "cause" and "effect" have been praised aesthetically. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, as well as sunsets routinely evoke human aesthetic response. The Christian knows that the very fabric of the universe expresses God's presence with majestic beauty and grandeur. Psalm 19:1 states, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork." Nature has been called the "aesthetics of the infinite." Through telescope or microscope, one can devote a lifetime to the study of some part of the universe—the skin, the eye, the sea, the flora and fauna, the stars, the climate. All of nature can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities which find their source in God, their Creator. In fact, we can assert that "the major premise of a Christian worldview, including a Christian aesthetic, is that God is the Creator."(1)

Human Creativity

"You have a wonderful imagination! Are you an artist?" Has anyone said such things to you? If so, perhaps you responded by saying something that would reject the person's perception of you. Most of us don't see ourselves as imaginative, artistic people. Indeed, most of us tend to think of the artist and imagination as terms that apply only to certain elite individuals who have left a legacy of work. "The truth is that in discussing the arts we are discussing something

universal to mankind.”(2) For example, anthropologists tell us all primitive peoples thought art was important.(3) Why is this true?

From the perspective of a Christian worldview the answer is found in how we are created. Since we are made in God’s image that must include the glorious concept that we too are creative. After creating man, God told him to subdue the earth and rule over it. Adam was to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) which was described by God as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The implication of this is very important. God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of “creation” with Him. He has permitted humans to take the elements of His cosmos and create new arrangements with them. Perhaps this explains the reason why creating anything is so fulfilling to us. We can express a drive within us which allows us to do something all humans uniquely share with their Creator.

God has thus placed before the human race a banquet table rich with aesthetic delicacies. He has supplied the basic ingredients, inviting those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest extent possible. We are privileged as no other creature to make and enjoy art.

There is a dark side to this, however, because sin entered and affected all of human life. A bent and twisted nature has emerged, tainting every field of human endeavor or expression and consistently marring the results. The unfortunate truth is that divinely-endowed creativity will always be accompanied in earthly life by the reality and presence of sin expressed through a fallen race. Man is Jekyll and Hyde: noble image-bearer and morally-crippled animal. His works of art are therefore bittersweet.

Understanding this dichotomy allows Christians to genuinely appreciate something of the contribution of every artist,

composer, or author. God is sovereign and dispenses artistic talents upon whom He will. While Scripture keeps us from emulating certain lifestyles of artists or condoning some of their ideological perspectives, we can nevertheless admire and appreciate their talent, which ultimately finds its source in God.

The fact is that if God can speak through a burning bush or Balaam's donkey, He can speak through a hedonistic artist! The question can never be how worthy is the vessel, but rather has truth been expressed? God's truth is still sounding forth today from the Bible, from nature, and even from fallen humanity.

Because of the Fall, absolute beauty in the world is gone. But participation in the aesthetic dimension reminds us of the beauty that once was, and anticipates its future luster. With such beauty present today that can take one's breath away, even in this unredeemed world, one can but speculate about what lies ahead for those who love Him!

Art and the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). We are to offer Him the best that we have—intellectually, artistically, and spiritually. Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the *Incarnation* (“the Word made flesh”), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real Man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of “other-worldly-ness” that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul's statement, “Unto the pure, all things are pure” (Titus

1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by God, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the artistic dimension. Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the tabernacle and eventually the temple. Here we find something unique in history art works conceived and designed by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Poetry is another evidence of God's love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament, including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, portions of the prophets, and Job contain poetry. Since God inspired the very words of Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages.

Music and dance are often found in the Bible. In Exodus 15 the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5 we find musicians in the temple, their instruments specifically made by King David for praising God. And we should remember that the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

The New Testament

The New Testament also includes artistic insights. The most obvious is the example of Jesus Himself. First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest,

the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master story-teller. He readily made use of His own cultural setting to impart His message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories, but they were nevertheless used to teach spiritual truths via the imagination.

We should also remember that the entire Bible is not only revelation, it is itself a work of art. And this work of art "has been the single greatest influence on art. It sheds more light upon the creative process and the use of the arts than any other source, because in it are found the great truths about man as well as God that are the wellsprings of art."(4)

Evaluating Art

Can the Bible help us evaluate art? Consider the concepts found in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

Let's concentrate for a few moments on this verse in order to see if it might at least provide the beginning of a framework for the evaluation and enjoyment of art.

Paul begins with *truth*. When considering art the Christian is compelled to ask, "Is this really true?" Does life genuinely operate in this fashion in light of God's revelation? And Christians must remember that truth includes the negatives as well as the positives of reality.

The second word refers to the concept of *honor* or *dignity*. This can refer to what we related earlier in this essay about the nature of man: we have dignity even though we are sinful. This gives a basis, for example, to reject the statements in

the work of the artist Francis Bacon. Bacon painted half-truths. He presented deterioration and hopeless despair, but he didn't present man's honor and dignity.

The third key to aesthetic comprehension has to do with the moral dimension—what is *right*. Not all art makes a moral statement, but when it does Christians must deal with it, not ignore it. For example, Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, is a powerful moral statement protesting the bombing by the Germans of a town by that name just prior to World War II. Protesting injustice is a cry for justice.

Purity is the fourth concept. It also touches on the moral— by contrasting that which is innocent, chaste, and pure from that which is sordid, impure, and worldly. For instance, one need not be a professional drama critic to identify and appreciate the fresh, innocent love of *Romeo and Juliet*, nor to distinguish it from the erotic escapades of a *Tom Jones*.

While the first four concepts have dealt with facets of artistic statements, the fifth focuses on sheer beauty: "Whatever is *lovely*." If there is little to evaluate morally and rationally, we are still free to appreciate what is beautiful in art.

The sixth concept, that of *good repute*, gives us impetus to evaluate the life and character of the artist. The less than exemplary lifestyle of an artist may somewhat tarnish his artistic contribution, but it doesn't necessarily obliterate it. The greatest art is true, skillfully expressed, imaginative, and unencumbered by the personal and emotional problems of its originators.

Excellence is yet another concept. It is a comparative term; it assumes that something else is not excellent. The focus is on quality, which is worth much discussion. But one sure sign of it is craftsmanship: technical mastery. Another sign is durability. Great art lasts.

The last concept is *praise*. Here we are concerned with the impact or the effect of the art. Great art can have power and is therefore a forceful tool of communication. Herein lies the “two-edged swordness” of art. It can encourage a culture to lofty heights, and it can help bring a culture to ruin. Paul undergirds this meaty verse by stating that we should let our minds “dwell on these things,” a reminder that Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance even in the artistic realm.

Thus it is my hope that we will pursue the artistic dimensions of our lives with intelligence and imagination. The world needs to see and hear from Christians committed to art for the glory of God.

Notes

1. C. Nolan Huizenga, “The Arts: A Bridge Between the Natural and Spiritual Realms,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 70.
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Frank E. Gaebelien, “Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 48-49.

©1997 Probe Ministries.

The New Absolutes

William Watkins' book The New Absolutes says that Americans are not relativists, we're actually absolutists. Rather than abandoning absolutes, we're adopting new ones in place of the

old.

Reality in the Balance

When Christians take a stand on a given moral issue—on abortion, for instance—what are some typical responses? Someone might say, “What right do you have to push *your* morality on the rest of us?” Or, “Abortion might be wrong for you, but it’s not for me.”

What these people are implying is that such beliefs are *relative*; that is, they are related to something else—an individual’s desires or circumstances, for example. Because people change through time, however, something that is true or good for a person today might not be so tomorrow. Nothing is true or good for all people at all times.

Have you noticed, however, that many of the same people who claim that truth and morality are relative can be found denouncing certain political views, or actively pushing the social acceptance of a formerly rejected lifestyle, or fighting for new rights in one area or another?

Author William Watkins *has* noticed, and he’s recorded his thoughts in a new book titled, *The New Absolutes*. Watkins believes that despite the rhetoric, Americans are in fact *not* relativists; we are in reality *absolutists*. He says that, rather than *abandoning* absolutes, we are simply adopting *new* ones to replace the *old*.

It is now believed, Watkins says, “that truth and error, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, normal and abnormal, and a host of other judgments are determined by the individual, . . . circumstances, or . . . culture. . . . There is no transcendent God or universal natural law we can point to that can inform us about who we are, what our world is like, and how we should get along in it.”

What is the source of this thinking? Watkins points to three

elements: a loss of belief in absolute truth, a strong belief in tolerance, and a detachment from people and institutions as a result of pessimism and distrust.

If Americans have concluded that ideas and morals are relative, however, why does Watkins say Americans are really absolutists? We are betrayed, he says, by our behavior.

Evidence that Watkins is right is seen in the glut of lawsuits in the courts, calls for law and order in politics, moral outrage over various offenses, cries for human rights, and the spreading of liberal democratic ideas to other countries. Americans have an idea of what is right, and we think others should agree with us. This is not relativism.

More significant, though, is how an absolutist mentality is seen in those who typically espouse relativism. For example, those who scream the loudest for *tolerance* often restrict others to saying and doing only what is politically correct. In the name of *pluralism* secularists push religion out of the public square. And *multiculturalists* condemn the West for its cultural practices. It seems that what is sauce for the goose is *not* sauce for the gander.

The average American who has come to accept relativistic notions of truth and morality might fairly be accused of being only inconsistent. But those who are real activists in the current fight for cultural change must bear the charge of blatant hypocrisy.

Old Absolutes vs. New Absolutes

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins contrasts ten traditional beliefs (old absolutes) with the ten beliefs that are replacing them (new absolutes). Though these new beliefs might not be “absolutes” in a strict, philosophical sense, they *function* as absolutes in contemporary society.

In this essay I'll look at three issues Watkins discusses—pro-

life versus pro-death beliefs, religion in the public square, and political correctness and tolerance—to see if, indeed, the social activists mentioned earlier are really the relativists they claim to be. As we consider these topics, I think you'll come to agree with Watkins that the culture war is not being fought between absolutists and relativists, but between two groups of absolutists.

Death: What a Beautiful Choice

First, let's consider the pro-life versus pro-death question.

According to Watkins, the *old* absolute was: "Human life from conception to natural death is sacred and worthy of protection." The *new* absolute is: "Human life, which begins and ends when certain individuals or groups decide it does, is valuable as long as it is wanted."

Two issues which bring this new belief to the fore are *abortion* and *physician-assisted suicide*. Few practices are as fiercely opposed or defended as abortion. Opponents say abortion is morally wrong for all people. Proponents say it is a matter of individual choice. Physician-assisted suicide draws similar responses.

It is easy to overstate the thinking of those espousing the new absolute of the value of life. Probably very few would say that they "love death" or would think of death as a "good" thing ranking up there, say, with riches and great health and freedom. Rather, death is more often thought of simply as the lesser of two evils.

Nevertheless, there *are* many who think of death as a positive thing, as something to be embraced, as the best answer to suffering or to certain hardships of life that many people experience.

Whether they think of death as a good thing or not, however, they think of it as a right not to be tampered with. It is

rooted, they say, in a Constitutional “right to privacy.”

In claiming this right, however, any foundation in relativistic thinking must be abandoned. For the very “right” proponents claim is itself an *absolute*. They are saying that the right of individuals to decide for themselves should be observed by everyone else. When they say it is wrong for pro-lifers to try to press their beliefs on others, they are stating an absolute. If they say that the value of human life is a matter of its quality rather than of intrinsic worth, they are stating another absolute.

Some relativists will try to wriggle out of the charge of absolutism by saying that their position might be right for now but not necessarily for all times and all places. Nonetheless, their ideas about the value of human life and the option of death as a solution to human suffering function as absolutes in our society today.

Watkins is correct. The stubbornness of abortion advocates and assisted-suicide proponents in defending their “rights” is good evidence for the claim that Americans, despite all the talk, are not relativists after all.

Freedom From Religion

It used to be held that “religion is the backbone of American culture, providing the moral and spiritual light needed for public and private life.” Now, according to Watkins, we have a *new* absolute: “Religion is the bane of public life, so for the public good it should be banned from the public square.”

Certainly there are those who are this adamant about the place of religion. These are the ones who raise a fuss when a prayer is uttered at a public school graduation ceremony or who complain when a nativity scene is set up on public property at Christmas.

Probably the majority of Americans are not this combative

about the issue. However, for a variety of reasons many believe religion should be kept separate from public life .

One reason is a misunderstanding of the First Amendment. We have been told over and over again that the separation of church and state requires that the government must not be involved with religious matters in any way. The new absolute is this: religion and public policy should be kept separate.

We don't often notice, however, that strict "separationists" do not talk much about our nation's beginnings. A study of our founding documents shows that religion was an integral part of Americans' lives; references to the Bible and Christian beliefs are often cited in the construction of our new government. Amazingly enough, the writers of the Constitution did not see in it the "wall of separation" current interpreters do.

Another reason people think religion should be kept a private matter is a misunderstanding about religion itself. Having been "schooled" in relativistic thinking, many (perhaps most) Americans believe that whatever they believe is true *for them*, but not necessarily for other people.

But this cannot be so. Religions provide an explanation of what is ultimately *real*. Either there is one true God or there is not. Either there is salvation through Jesus, or there is enlightenment through meditation, or there is some other way to find fulfillment. Not all of these can be true *in reality*.

This issue gets really tangled up when we bring in the matter of rights. The idea that everyone has the right to worship as he or she chooses has been transformed to mean that each person's choice of religion is true. "I have the right to believe as I wish" becomes "My belief is as true as yours." The fact that I believe something makes it true.

But is that how things work in other areas of life? If I believe that I am a millionaire, does that make me one? With

respect to religion, does believing there is a God put Him there? Or does believing there is no God produce a god-less universe?

The new absolutism with respect to religion is a very real concern for many Americans. As Christians we are taught that our beliefs have meaning for all of life, not just for the prayer closet, yet bringing such beliefs out into the public arena has brought some Christians great difficulty.

It is ironic that, in a nation which began with a strong desire for the free expression of religious beliefs, people are now being forced more and more to leave their beliefs at home.

Does this sound like relativism to you?

The Politically Correct Life

The hypocrisy of the new absolutism is seen more clearly than anywhere else in what is now called "political correctness" or PC for short.

To be politically correct is to be in line with certain ideals promoted by the new cultural reformers, ideals such as abortion rights, multiculturalism, gender feminism, and homosexual rights. To say or do anything which goes against these ideals is to be politically incorrect.

It is easier to understand PC if we think of it as the end of a chain of thinking.

First is the acceptance of relativism, the idea that there are no absolutes. This belief, taken with our democratic idea of equality, results in the belief that everyone's beliefs and choices are equal or equally valid. There should be no discrimination against other beliefs or lifestyles. This is the *new tolerance*, the prime virtue of the new reformers.

When history is viewed from this perspective, it seems clear that history is the story of the strong taking advantage of the weak. The weak—or disadvantaged—are victims who now require extra help to attain their rightful place of equality. Merely belonging to a victimized group is enough to expect this extra help regardless of whether a given individual has been victimized. The advantaged must now be sensitive to the “needs” of the disadvantaged to avoid making them feel any more victimized and must work to protect their rights. Finally, the advantaged must not do or say anything which could be interpreted as differentiating the disadvantaged, of showing them as different in a negative way. Being sensitive to the plight of the “oppressed” and avoiding doing or saying anything which might make them feel marginalized or inadequate or looked down upon . . . this is *political correctness*.

It is certainly true that there have been and are people who oppress others. This must be opposed. The problem with political correctness, however, lies in over-correcting the wrong.

For example, in *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins lists some words some real estate agents learn to shun in an effort to avoid offending potential buyers. *Executive* has racist overtones since most executives are white. *Sports enthusiast* might make the disabled feel left out. *Master bedroom* creates images of slavery. *Walk-in closet* could offend people who can't walk.

Author Stan Gaede [pronounced Gay-dee], in his book *When Tolerance Is No Virtue*, says that “the overt goal of PC . . . is to enforce a uniform standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background or sexual orientation. The problem is that the items on this list . . . are not precisely parallel to each other. Though each is the basis for discrimination in our society, they involve very different kinds of issues. So the question immediately becomes: What does it mean to be tolerant *in each case*? . . . PC allows each

group to define tolerance for itself.”

We have now come full circle. The relativism which purportedly undergirds the new tolerance gives way to exactly what it was trying to be rid of, namely, absolutes. That is, the reformers make their own ideals the new guidelines for society. We are all expected to abide by them. These are the new absolutes.

How should Christians respond to all this? Next, we'll look at how the new absolutes are promoted, and we'll think about how we might respond.

Absolutely For the Common Good

It's a myth that America is a relativistic society. The truth is, Americans are a very moralistic people. What is alarming, however, is how cultural reformers are seeking to establish new absolutes which go against traditional ones. Watkins shows how these reformers are setting up new rules we all must follow.

How shall we understand the contradiction between claims of relativism on the one hand, and the imposition of new absolutes on the other? Watkins believes the claim to relativism is an attempt “to rationalize . . . misbehavior and disarm . . . critics.” For example, individuals might fall back on relativism to justify sexual activity once held to be deviant. However, the supposed relativist quickly becomes an absolutist when he wants *others* to agree with *him* on a given idea or issue.

But if everything is relative, how are relativists able to convince others of the rightness of their own beliefs? They can't appeal to a foundation of unchanging realities and objective truths and be consistent with their relativism.

So how do they do it? Calling opponents names, “fundamentalist” is a popular term, or repeating simplistic clichés—“safe, legal abortion” for example—are a couple of

their favorite means. The media play a strong role in this process, especially television. Captivating images, clever writing, strategically placed laugh tracks, and other elements persuasively convey ideas without logical reasoning.

It is crucial that we step back to see what this situation sets us up for. If we are conditioned to be persuaded by sloganeering rather than by rational discourse, we are prepared to be taken in by any smooth talker. All our clamor for rights and for the authority of the individual has the unexpected result of preparing us to lose our freedoms at the hands of charismatic tyrants.

What can we do to turn things around?

First, Watkins believes that reality itself is on our side. The new absolutes go against the way the universe is. Many women who opt for childlessness, for example, find themselves late in life confronting their own maternal instincts. We can point out these facts to those who believe we can do anything we want and get along quite nicely.

Second, we can learn to recognize sloganeering and insist that the cultural reformers use sound reason when promoting their ideals.

Third, we can point to the hypocrisy of so-called relativists. Homosexuals who barge in on church services demanding tolerance for their lifestyle must see how intolerant *they* are. Those who demand freedom of thought and expression cannot reasonably exclude religious beliefs from public discourse.

As strange as it might sound at first, William Watkins calls us to a renewed *intolerance*. He says, "We must violate the new tolerance and become people marked by intolerance. Not an intolerance that unleashes hate upon people, but an intolerance that's unwilling to allow error to masquerade as truth. An intolerance that calls evil *evil* and good *good*."

To reestablish the old absolutes, Watkins calls for the acknowledgment of certain beliefs, such as: all life is precious; relativism is false; the moral law is real; and, religion is essential. A return to these basics will return us to sound public policy-making, to greater civil order, and to moral progress.

©1997 Probe Ministries.

The World of the Apostle Paul

Rick Wade examines different aspects of life in the day of the Apostle Paul: religion, philosophy, the family unit, social morality, and Christians' conflict with the culture.



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

Religion

The purpose of this essay is to take a look at the Greco-Roman world in which the Apostle Paul lived so that we can better comprehend his ministry. Understanding the historical context helps us to gain such a perspective. We'll discuss religion, philosophy, the family unit, and the social morality of the Hellenistic culture with a concluding look at the conflict Christians faced.

Let's begin with the religion of the first century. Two episodes in the book of Acts provide insight into the religious beliefs and practices of that time.

In Acts 19 we read about the trouble Paul's companions got into over His ministry in Ephesus. Craftsmen who made

miniature shrines of Artemis, the local deity, objected to Paul's teaching that "man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26). In Paul's world, religion was an integral part of everyone's life. State-sponsored civic cults were one religious expression participated in by everybody. Historian Everett Ferguson notes that "the most deeply ingrained religious beliefs and practice in both Greece and Rome. . . . were associated with the traditional civic cult."[\(1\)](#) The state both funded and profited by these cults.

Each city had its patron deity. The city of Ephesus honored Artemis, the goddess of nature and of childbirth. The statue of Artemis stood in a magnificent temple, four times as large as the Parthenon in Athens. Deities such as Artemis were honored with festivals, prayers, and sacrifices. Annual festivals included banquets, entertainment, sacrifices, processions, athletic contests, and the performance of mystery rites. Prayers included invocation, praise, and petition with the goal of receiving the favor of the goddess. Sacrifices were offered for praise, thanksgiving, or supplication.

The riot in Ephesus that resulted from Paul's teaching was prompted partly by monetary concerns; the craftsmen were afraid of losing business. But the chant, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" which went on for two hours—by people who didn't even know what the specific problem was—shows that money was not the only issue. The strength of religious devotion to the civic cults was such that Roman emperors saw the advantage of identifying with them instead of fighting them. We'll talk more about that later in this essay.

Ephesus was also a major center of magical activity, another part of the religious practice of the first century. In Acts 19 we read about practitioners of magic or sorcery forsaking their practices and burning their scrolls as they publicly declared their new faith.

The Ephesians' scrolls contained secret words and formulas

which were used to force the gods to do one's bidding. The precise formula was critical. Practitioners sought wealth, healing, or power; they even used magic in an attempt to gain another person's love. Because it was also believed that to know someone's true name was to have power over that person, names and formulas were blended to produce strong magic.

Paul carried his message to a world with a multitude of religious beliefs, and the message he proclaimed showed its power over them. As we look at our culture with its increasingly pluralistic religious spectrum, we must remember that we, too, carry the same gospel with the same power.

Philosophy

When the Apostle Paul visited Athens, he took the message of Christ to the marketplace where a wide variety of people could be encountered. Among those he talked to were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. We read about his encounter with them in Acts 17.

Who were these Epicureans and Stoics? I'd like to give a thumbnail sketch of their ideas about God, man, and the world which will help us understand why Paul what he did.

Stoicism and Epicureanism were philosophies which were developed to free people from the concerns of the present life.

Stoicism was materialistic and pantheistic. That is, Stoics believed that everything was composed of matter. The higher form of matter was of a divine nature, and it pervaded the universe. They called it various things: fire, Zeus, or even God. They believed that this divine "fire," or God, generated the universe and would one day take the universe back into itself through a great conflagration. This cycle of creation and conflagration is repeated eternally.

Stoicism was thus deterministic. Things are the way they are

and can't be changed. To find true happiness, they believed one should understand the course of nature through reason and simply accept things the way they are.

In contrast to the Stoics, Paul taught that God is personal and not a part of this universe. He also taught that there would be a judgment to come, not a giant conflagration leading to another cycle.

Epicureans focused on the individual's happiness, also, but they went in a completely different direction than the Stoics. They believed that the way to happiness was through maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Tranquility was sought through a quiet, contemplative life lived among a community of friends.

Epicureans were materialists, also, but they weren't pantheists. They believed the universe was formed from atoms falling through space which occasionally bumped into each other accidentally, eventually forming the stars and planets and us. When we die, we simply become dissolved into atoms again. Epicureans believed in the gods, but thought they were like men, only of a higher order. The gods resided out in space somewhere, enjoying a life of quiet pleasure like that of the Epicureans. They had nothing to do with men. Apart from participation in sacrifices and religious rituals for aesthetic purposes, Epicureans believed humans needn't worry about the gods.

Against the Epicureans, Paul taught that God *is* involved in the affairs of His creation and created us specifically to search for Him. Of course, Paul's doctrine of a future judgment didn't fit with their thinking either.

As Paul evangelized the Greek world, he sometimes used their terminology and concepts; he even quoted their poets. But he preached a very different message. Maybe we, too, can find common ground with our culture by knowing what people believe and by putting the gospel into terms they understand. Without

modifying the message itself, we must phrase it in a way that it can be understood. If we don't, we'll have a hard time getting people to listen.

The Family Unit

We've given some attention to the religion and philosophy of Paul's day, but what about the social structures of the Greco-Roman world? More specifically, what was the family like in the first century?

By the first century A.D., marriage was mostly by mutual consent. Historian Everett Ferguson describes marriage this way: "Consent to live together constituted marriage in all societies, and the procreation of children was its explicit object. Marriages were registered in order to make the children legitimate." [\(2\)](#) Although marriages were mostly monogamous, adultery was common. Divorce required only oral or written notice.

Men had the dominant role in the family. They had absolute authority over their children and slaves. Wives remained under their fathers' authority. Men occupied their time with business interests and such social outlets as banquets, and the gymnasia which included exercise facilities, pools, and lecture halls. These functioned as community centers.

In the husband's absence the wife might conduct his business for him. However, managing the home was the wife's primary responsibility. Ferguson quotes the Greek writer Apollodorus who said, "We have courtesans for pleasure, handmaidens for the day-to-day care of the body, wives to bear legitimate children and to be a trusted guardian of things in the home." [\(3\)](#)

Women weren't necessarily confined to the home, however. Some engaged in occupations as diverse as music, medicine, and commerce. Many held civic office, and some held leadership

positions in the religious cults.

Children were not considered a part of the family until acknowledged by the father. They could be sold or exposed if not wanted.

Parents were on their own to find suitable education for their children. Girls could go to the elementary schools, but that was rare. They mostly learned household skills at home. Although most boys learned a trade at home or through an apprenticeship, they could go through a series of primary, secondary, and advanced schooling depending on their class status. Rote memorization was a key element in primary education. Rhetoric was the most important subject in advanced education.

Slaves were a part of the family unit in the Roman Empire. They might be obtained through a number of means including war, child exposure, and the sale of persons to pay debts. Slaves might work in the mines, in temples, in homes as teachers, or in industry; they even held high positions as administrators in civil bureaucracy. Slaves often earned enough money to buy their own freedom, although they had to continue working for their former owners.

Into this society the apostles brought new ideas about the value of the individual and about family relationships. Husbands were to be faithful to their own wives and to love them as their own bodies. Children were to be seen as much more than economic assets or liabilities. Masters were told to treat slaves with justice and fairness. People today who revile Christianity as being "oppressive" probably have no idea how much it elevated people in the Hellenistic world.

Social Morality

Moral instruction in the Hellenistic world was found more in philosophy and custom than in religion. Religion was largely

external; that is, it was a matter of ritual more than of inner transformation. Philosophy sought to teach people how to live. Philosophers gave much attention to such matters as virtue, friendship, and civic responsibility.[\(4\)](#)

Historian Everett Ferguson notes that evidence from the Greco-Roman era indicates that many people lived quite virtuous lives. Inscriptions on grave stones, for example, include praises for husbands and wives for kindness and faithfulness.[\(5\)](#)

In spite of all this, history reveals a morally debased culture in the first century. One example is sexual immorality. "The numerous words in the Greek language for sexual relations," says Ferguson, "suggest a preoccupation with this aspect of life."[\(6\)](#) As I noted earlier, adultery was common. Men often had courtesans for physical pleasure. Homosexuality between young men or between an older and a younger man was openly accepted. Temple prostitution was part of some religious cults.

A low estimate of human worth was exhibited in the Hellenistic world. Earlier I mentioned child exposure as a way of getting rid of children. Unwanted babies—more often girls—were put on the garbage pile or left in some isolated area to die. They might be picked up to be used, to be sold as slaves, or to serve as prostitutes.

The brutality of the day was seen most clearly in the games in the Roman amphitheaters. Ferguson notes that, "The amphitheaters of the west testify to the lust for blood under the empire. The spectacles of gladiatorial combat—man against man, man against animal, and animal against animal—drew huge crowds and replaced Greek drama and athletics in popularity."[\(7\)](#) Executions were considered less exciting than mortal combat. Consequently, when executions were included in the day's program, they were typically carried out during the lunch break. One of the ways criminals were disposed of was by

dressing them in animal skins and throwing them to wild animals.

Such brutality was extended to the Christians in the days of persecutions. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* records that Nero had Christians thrown to the wild animals. He also had them dipped in wax, mounted on trees, and burned like giant torches in his gardens. [\(8\)](#)

Into this world of immorality and brutality came the message of love and righteousness found in Jesus. As with Judaism before, Christianity put religion and morality together. It revealed God's standard of goodness and the sacrificial love of Christ, and it provided the power to attain that standard through the regenerating work of the Spirit based on Christ's work on the cross.

Today, ethics and religion are again separate. And the results are being seen. But as in the first century, Christians today have a message of grace for our society: God not only tells us what *is* good, He also enables us to *be* good.

Christians' Conflict with the Culture

In the early church, the character of Christians was very important for gaining a hearing and for winning converts as they boldly gave testimony of their new faith.

What were these Christians like? The writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written probably in the early second century, said this about them: "They marry as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all." [\(9\)](#)

If their lives were of such an exemplary nature, what was it

that got Christians into so much trouble? Two of the most important factors were their unwillingness to participate in religious rituals and their refusal to bow before the images of the emperors.

Earlier I mentioned the importance of the civic religious cults in the Hellenistic world. The people believed that the gods required their sacrifices and other observances; otherwise, they would be angry and take their wrath out on the people as a whole. For the Christians to refuse to participate was to risk angering the gods.

The other factor was the matter of emperor worship. When Rome conquered the Western world, the rulers saw how important religion was to the people. Rather than fight against this, they took advantage of it by putting images of the Roman emperors in places of worship with the other deities. This wasn't a big problem for the Greeks. Apart from the fact that the Romans were their rulers, Greeks weren't exclusive in their worship. To worship one deity didn't preclude worshiping others as well.

For the Christians, however, Jesus was *Lord*; there could be no other gods besides Him, and they couldn't bow before anyone who claimed divine authority, including the emperor. However, since in the minds of the Romans the emperor represented the state, to refuse to bow before his image was to be an enemy of the state.

Thus, because of their refusal to participate in these activities, Christians were called atheists and enemies of the state. Their behavior was baffling to their neighbors. Why couldn't they just go through the motions? As I already noted, religion was non-exclusive. The people didn't necessarily believe in the gods to whom they made sacrifice, anyway. And since there was little or no connection between religion and ethics, one's religious activities didn't normally affect one's moral life. So, why couldn't the Christians just play

along? The reason they couldn't was that to bow before the emperors or the gods would be to commit idolatry which was *the* fundamental sin in the early church.

Christians in the early church had to decide where they could conform to their society and where they couldn't. There was a difference of opinion as to what was appropriate and what wasn't. But it was clear that anyone who would be identified as a Christian had to draw the line here: Jesus is Lord, and there is no other.

Notes

1. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 188.
2. Ibid., 68.
3. Ibid., 70-71.
4. Ibid., 303.
5. Ibid., 64.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Spire Books, 1968), 13.
9. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 136.

©1997 Probe Ministries.

Morality Apart From God

Recently, I became aware of a professor at one of the local colleges whose goal is to convince his students that you can have a system of ethics without a belief in God. Now I agree with him that holding his position is theoretically possible,

but I said to him that such an ethical system is one built on sand. It would not stand the test of time nor the waves of adversity.

The U.S.S.R. tried to build an empire on godless atheism, and it failed miserably. Today in Russia we still see the results of the ethics of atheism. You would think that the Russians, having suffered so much under a totalitarian regime, would strive to do the right thing in appreciation for their new freedoms. Many have, but Russia today is torn apart by crime, greed, lawlessness, and immorality. Why? Was it merely too much freedom too soon, or are they still reaping the rewards of the ethics of atheism?

Many people today believe that God is, at best, unnecessary, and at worst, an intolerant task master. They say they don't need God to live right, and they can set their own rules for life. We live in a world obsessed with personal values. What people do depends on their personal values, but since everyone's values are different, there seems to be no standard by which we must all live. The very idea of basing our morality upon our values means that we have bought into the idea of a system of relativistic ethics. Personal values have replaced values of virtue as the foundation for ethical thought. Virtues speak of some objective realities, but personal values speak only about subjective decisions of our will.

Basing ethical decisions on personal values is problematic. For example, is something good because we love it, or do we love it because it is good? German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche would tell us that something is good because we love it. According to Nietzsche, man himself is the universal and absolute reference point for all of life. "God is dead," he declared, believing this release from the demands of any metaphysical reality was an opportunity to develop his own system of ethics based on self cultivation.

Today the world is continuing to build an ethical system based on tolerance and enlightenment apart from God. Men have tried many ways to teach this new godless form of morality. A decade ago we constantly heard the term, "values clarification." It was a national effort to allow even children to set their own standards of behavior. It was a disaster as it justified almost any kind of behavior. Educators may not loosely throw around the term, "values clarification," as they once did, but many still try to teach a system of ethics based on man's own values. These are values which are rooted in the idea of desirable goods, i.e., that which we decide is important to us.

The use of the term "values" can have objective content, but we must evaluate the source of that "objective content," and that leads us back to the question at hand: Is it possible to have true morality without a belief in God?

In this essay I will address this question by presenting common arguments against the need for God and then I will respond to those arguments.

What Is Ethics Without God?

From the time of the Greeks, there have been many philosophers who have sought to prove that it is possible to have a universal morality without God. There have been many arguments presented to support this position, and in theory they may be right, depending on what one means by the word *universal*. They would say, all you have to have is a consensus on what is considered right and wrong behavior. Their position, with which I disagree, goes something like this:

First: If God is necessary for morality, then whatever God deems moral is moral. Therefore, why praise God for what He has done if He could have just as likely done the opposite, and it would have been equally moral. If whatever God says goes, then if God decreed that adultery was permissible, then

adultery would be permissible. If things are neither right nor wrong independently of God's will, then God cannot choose one thing over another because it is right. Thus, if He does choose one over another, His choice must be arbitrary. But a being whose decisions are arbitrary is not worthy of worship.

Second: If goodness is a defining attribute of God, then God cannot be used to define goodness. If we do so, we are guilty of circular reasoning. That is, if we use goodness to define God, we can't also use God to define goodness.

Third: If one doesn't believe in God, being told that one must do as God commands will not help one solve any moral dilemmas.

Some philosophers, therefore, come to the following conclusion: the idea that a moral law requires a divine lawgiver is untenable.[\(1\)](#)

What should be our response as Christians? We should point out to people who side with the preceding position their lack of understanding concerning both God and the nature of man.

God is the creator and sustainer of all things. We would not even be self aware, let alone aware of right and wrong, if God had not created within us His image, and therefore the ability to make moral distinctions. The truth is we have no reference point for all this discussion about morality except as God reveals it. For us to argue with the source of morality is for the clay to argue with the potter.

Some philosophers say that for God to define what is right or wrong is arbitrary. God is not arbitrary; He is the source of all life and therefore the source of all truth. We have no basis to even understand the concept of being arbitrary except in reference to an unchanging God. That which would be circular reasoning or arbitrary in discussions about ourselves comes into perfect focus as we bring the dilemma close to the universal, absolute focal point for all creation, God Himself.

The second problem with these arguments is that they fail to recognize the nature of man. If man were not fallen, i.e., not corrupted by sin, we would have limitless potential to create from within ourselves a universal moral code. But, we are a fallen lot, every last one of us, and therefore incapable of fully knowing what is good (Rom. 3:23). We are even incapable of carrying out what we do know to be good (Rom. 7:18-21).

So the question of right or wrong has everything to do with the origin of our belief, not just the substance of it. No matter how sincerely I believe I am right about some moral decision, the true test is in the origin of that belief. And God is the only universal and absolute origin to all morality.

The Ethics of Belief

We are discussing arguments for the removal of God from ethical systems of morality. Many are trying to formulate an ethical platform that is devoid of any need for God.

We previously looked at one approach based on the idea that the need for a divine lawgiver is arbitrary and untenable.

Another argument, also based on scientific naturalism, holds that it is immoral to hold to a belief for which one has no evidence. The problem is that the backers of this theory are naturalists and, therefore, automatically limit all evidence to that which is naturalistic, i.e., what can scientifically be tested. For such people, putting any trust at all in the metaphysical is folly.

To these naturalists, all humans are born with a moral sense which becomes a habit of virtue as we practice comradeship and work through our common struggles. It is merely the result of a social instinct born within us.

This is a very evolutionary approach to knowledge and ethics that considers theistic approaches as outmoded hypotheses. Scientific discourse is seen as an alternative to faith. [\(2\)](#)

As Christians, we recognize that man is more than just material; there is a lot more to us than just the physical body. We see this in our ability to mentally stand back and evaluate our lives, our ability to know right from wrong, and our self awareness and personality that make us unique from the rest of God's creation.

Because of our Christian perspective, we are interested not just in the physical evidences to the realities of life, but in the metaphysical evidences as well. For example, we have this book called the Holy Bible. It obviously is physical in nature because we can hold it and feel it and read it. But is there valid evidence that this book contains a message from God? Yes, in fact there are countless other books written to affirm that there is, in the pages of the Bible, a metaphysical message from the Creator of the Universe. The historic testimony of the ages confirms to our satisfaction that this book is the very communication from God to us. Can we prove this with scientific experiments? No. But, we have experienced countless testimonies and evidences that this book is more than just physical in its nature.

As Christians we must not allow the reductionism of this present age to eliminate the metaphysical in ethical dialogue. We must use the truth of God's Word unashamedly. We do not need to defend the Bible, for the Bible will defend itself. We just need to use it and live it to show the reality of God in our lives and demonstrate the power of our changed lives.

When man is allowed to see himself as only an animal, controlled by inborn or acquired instincts, he becomes self-centered and power oriented. Everything becomes an issue of power to be what he wants to be, and we either seek to create our own reality and purpose in life as the existentialist would do, or we slump into the despair of the postmodernist who says nothing makes any difference, and it really doesn't matter what we do.

Next we will look at what can happen if we allow the world to tell us we are nothing but living flesh, totally on our own in this physical universe.

From a Crack in the Dam, To a Flood in the Valley

Intellectuals like Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Tillich and many others who have followed them have tried to create a godless society, a society free to create its own ethical system without the constraints of God-given mandates.

What can we expect if these leaders are able to advance their model for a system of ethics that has no need for God?

An interesting example may be the story of the medical profession in Germany during the Nazi regime. The medical profession is supposed to be the protector of human life. The Hippocratic Oath, that dates back to the Egyptians, states the highest standards of trust for those dedicating themselves to this honorable profession.

How did the medical profession in Germany become nothing more than an instrument of death in the hands of the Nazis? First, one's view of the nature of man had to change from that of a spiritual being to that of a purely physical being of no universal value beyond what society places on the individual. Through years of assault upon traditional morals and biblical truths, the German people began to see mankind through the eyes of German philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. These men viewed humanity as strictly flesh and blood, different from the animals only in progression, not in basic nature. [\(3\)](#)

Once the German population in general, and the medical profession in particular, was sold on a collectivist-authoritarian way of life, everything was in place to use the medical profession to accomplish the purposes of the Third

Reich.

The Nazi holocaust began with a subtle shift in attitude that judged the value of people based upon their cost/benefit ratio to the state. First, it started with sterilization and euthanasia of people with severe psychiatric illnesses. Soon all those with chronic illness were being exterminated. Before too long, all patients who had been sick for five years or more, or were medically unable to work and unlikely to recover were transported to killing centers; what started as “mercy killings” in rare cases of extreme mental illness soon expanded to mass extermination on an unprecedented scale. Before long all those who could not work and were medically evaluated as incapable of being rehabilitated were killed. [\(4\)](#)

The German medical profession then started using human body parts for medical research, and this led to the grisly “terminal human experiments,” in which live people were used in medical experiments. [\(5\)](#)

It all started with the idea that humans belong to society and the state. According to this view, if someone is a burden to society and the state, it is logical to conclude that their life was not a life worth living. From the first decision to put to death burdensome mental patients, a chain of events followed that ultimately led to the death of the majority of all the Jews in Europe, as well as millions of other “undesirables.”

If we don't believe we are created by God, but simply highly evolved animals, and if we believe we have accountability only to society, then there is no end to the depths of depravity that we can go in our search to justify our actions. Corrosion of morals begins in microscopic proportions, but if not checked by a standard beyond ourselves, it will continue until the corrosion wipes away the very foundation of our lives, and we find ourselves sinking in a sea of relativity.

Repairing the Ethical Breach

In this essay we have been addressing the danger of trying to establish an ethical system apart from the need for God.

I was recently impressed by an editorial in the *Dallas Morning News*. Written by Al Casey, the editorial was entitled, "Our ethical foundation needs repair." [\(6\)](#) In emphasizing the need for high ethical standards, Mr. Casey quotes the famous medical missionary, Dr. Albert Schweitzer: "Ethics is concern for good behavior . . . an obligation to consider not only our personal well-being, but also that of others and of human society as a whole." [\(7\)](#)

This is so true, but there is an even higher standard than what we might consider the good of human society. It is God alone who can set that standard. Earlier we spoke of some unbelievable atrocities that were committed by the German medical profession for the "good of society."

There is an old adage that says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Human beings left to themselves often start out with good intentions, but somehow, without guidance from above and obedient hearts, we lose our way.

Al Casey came the closest to the truth when he quoted Professor Alexander Tytler of the University of Edinburgh:

From bondage to spiritual faith.
From spiritual faith to great courage.
From courage to liberty.
From liberty to abundance.
From abundance to selfishness.
From selfishness to complacency.
From complacency to apathy.
From apathy to dependency.
From dependency back again into bondage. [\(8\)](#)

A consensus of ethical norms apart from the supervision of God will eventually erode. Power begins to take over in determining our actions. Look at our government today. It is controlled for the most part by special interest groups vying for influence. Every day I receive in the mail a plea for funds to help some group influence our government. What ever happened to sending upright men and women to Washington and trusting them to do the right thing without our funding various organizations that seek to influence our leaders to do their bidding?

Mr. Casey said it right, "To an alarming extent, America has become complacent, a nation inhabited by people concerned only with their own well-being." [\(9\)](#)

But, we don't just need a code of ethics, as important as that is; we need to put God back into our lives. We need to submit to His leadership in our lives, to recognize that only the God who created us knows what is best for us and only God is capable of revealing to us the ethical standards that can ultimately bring the peace we so desperately seek.

How do we do that? It starts with His book, the Holy Bible. God has spelled out some pretty clear principles on how to treat others. Do we love others as we love ourselves? That is not so easy when everyone around us is living out the relativistic ethics of power. The true force of Christianity has never been the use of power plays to conquer the world. From the Crusades of the Middle Ages to the moral majority of the last decade, efforts by Christians to use political or economic power to advance the Kingdom of God have been questionable, if not disastrous. The true power of Christendom has always been the testimony of Christians who are living out their faith in a world obsessed with self promotion—Christians who are in the Word of God and who maintain ethical and moral integrity!

Notes

1. Theodore Schick, Jr., "Morality Requires God . . . or Does It?," *Free Inquiry* (Summer 1997), pp. 32-34.
2. Timothy J. Madigan, "The Virtues of 'The Ethics of Belief,'" *Free Inquiry* (Spring 1997), pp. 29-33.
3. Leo Alexander, *Medical Science Under Dictatorship* (Flushing, N.Y.: Bibliographic Press, 1996), p. 9.
4. Ibid.
5. Maccaro, James A., "'From Small Beginnings:' The Road to Genocide," *The Freeman* (August 1997), pp. 479-81.
6. Casey, Al, "Our ethical foundation needs repair," *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 27 July 1997, p. 6J.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

© 1997 Probe Ministries

Ethics: Pick or Choose?

Written by Ray Cotton

How to Choose Right From Wrong

After four years at Harvard University as an undergraduate, one student proclaimed in his graduation oration that there was one central idea, one sentiment which they all acquired in their Harvard careers; and that is, in one word, confusion.

That same year, Harvard's graduate-student orator said, "They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true."[{1}](#)

Our universities are teaching students that there are no solid guidelines to life. Since everything is relative, they are totally free to create anything they want out of their lives. Students are told that no one has a right to tell them how they ought to live. Decisions about right and wrong are strictly up to them. It makes no difference what they choose to make of their lives. Students are not encouraged to ask the traditional questions about the usefulness of life or the value of an exemplary life. As the above graduate student pointed out, they don't even want you to take your own conclusions about life seriously. It is a philosophy of ambiguity. It is the philosophy of humanistic existentialism. Many today are striving to break away from traditional values and embrace a sense of futility. Today we see it in the lives of teenagers who have "tried everything" and found life to be wanting. We see it in the life style of the "survivalists" who have given up hope in God and the future, holing up in defense of a coming catastrophe.[{2}](#)

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the fathers of humanistic existentialism, the world is absurd, lacking any concept of ultimate justification. Sartre declares we have no ultimate purpose or plan to our lives. We are nothing and are therefore free to make ourselves into anything we want to be.[{3}](#) It doesn't even matter if you believe in your own proclamations because there is no more reason for you to exist than for you to not exist. Both are the same. The existentialist says you can just pick and choose your values. It makes no difference. There is no transcendent truth or power beyond man himself. Sartre doesn't believe in any God,

nor does he believe that there is any preconceived design. There is no principle of authority to determine action. He says one must invent an original solution for each situation.^{4} Therefore, in the sovereignty of his freedom, man creates his own values. Morality is rooted in human choice. Man alone gives his life its importance. Mankind must somehow transcend a life of absurdity and despair.

Is this humanly created reality true or are those who believe it trying to live in a dream world? Is the existentialist trying desperately to deflect the true absurdity and despair of his position? Is this the view of life that we expect our college students to be learning?

The Foundation of Existentialism

Prior to World Wars I & II, modern man believed that through science and human engineering an ever better world was evolving. They believed that mankind was getting better, that peace and prosperity would reign. They were convinced that we had finally figured out how to live together in harmony and to build a better world.

Then came the rude awakening of two world wars and the hideous crimes against human beings perpetuated by Hitler's Third Reich. Out of the continuing frustration and destruction of World War II came a new philosophy of life. It was a philosophy conceived by those who had lost hope, who could only see the chaos. They lost their hope in any ultimate meaning for life. They were unable to see beyond the carnage of war-torn Europe. Their view of life was called humanistic existentialism.

Men like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus sought to establish a new view of life, a "new humanism" with a whole new set of values. Prior to these men, the need for a transcendent force, a higher authority beyond man himself, helped set limits and gave guidance to our lives. An example of this transcendence

would be the Ten Commandments, given to man by God. These new philosophers defined transcendence in an entirely different way. They saw transcendence only in their own aims and goals. For the existentialists, transcendence was a way to escape what they saw as the meaninglessness of life by establishing aims and goals to make whatever they wanted out of themselves, to create their own reality. For them there were no norms or standards, other than what they might choose to agree upon among themselves.

You have to realize that for these existentialist thinkers, all human activities were equivalent in value. Human activity amounted to the same thing "whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations."[{5}](#) However, without God, there can be no transcendent view of human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it.[{6}](#) Man is merely an evolved animal. Today we see many young people caught up in this attitude of cynicism and despair. They just don't care anymore. Life has become jaded. Many young people pass their time in a fantasy world of drugs, music and sex.[{7}](#)

Man's nothingness forms the foundation of existential thinking. Man is an empty bubble floating on a sea of nothingness.[{8}](#)

Trying to build an ethic for life based on the philosophy of existentialism is quite a challenge. Not only do the existentialists have to create a set of values to live by, but first of all, they have to create optimism out of a view of absurdity and despair. It is called an ethic of ambiguity because each person has no one to answer to but himself. There is no one else to blame, each individual is without excuse. Life is merely a game to be won or lost, to seek to become one's own hero.

The existentialist wills himself to be free and in so doing wills himself to be moral.[{9}](#)

Existentialism Collides with a Biblical Worldview

We live in a world that has been characterized as “plastic”, without value and sterile. Many have forgotten what it means to live, to be fully human. Hours are spent in front of the TV, in a world of fantasy and escapism. Many people are becoming devoid of human warmth and significant human interaction.[{10}](#)

In this essay I have examined the ethics of humanistic existentialism. To fully understand ethics one must have considerable clarity about what it is to be human.[{11}](#) Is man an evolved animal required to create his own essence, as the existentialist would say? Though there is freedom to choose our own actions, there is no significance in our actions. Choices are made in the face of meaninglessness. The values of existentialism are anchored in the world of ordinary experiences. Their values come from what is. And for the existentialist what is, is man’s absurd condition.[{12}](#)

How does existentialism compare to a God-centered, theistic view of ethics? For the Christian, ethical values are revealed to man by God. Perfect freedom lies only in service to God.[{13}](#) The existentialist defines God as “self-caused” and then says there is no God because it is impossible to be self-caused. The Christian says that God is “uncaused”, not self-caused. If you want absolute freedom, it is all too easy to deem God nonexistent. Even Sartre admits that “since we ignore the commandments of God [concerning] all value prescribed as eternal, nothing remains but what is strictly voluntary.”[{14}](#) Throwing off all limitations and declaring his atheism, Sartre explains the process in his autobiography:

I had been playing with matches and burned a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt His gaze inside my head and on my hands...I

flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion, I blasphemed...He never looked at me again...I had the more difficulty getting rid of Him [the Holy Ghost] in that He had installed Himself at the back of my head...I collared the Holy Ghost in the cellar and threw Him out.{15}

Aldous Huxley, another famous existentialist, said:

For myself, no doubt for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was ... from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.{16}

The truth of Huxley's words ring out loud and clear. All around us we find individuals rejecting the truth of God's word and embracing false doctrines that allow them to vent their passions and immorality. Satan loves to get us discouraged and despairing, then he shows us a false way out that caters to our old fleshly nature, a way that allows us to do as we please.

The Bible says that we are in bondage either to sin or to God. We will serve one or the other. Our only choice is to decide who or what we will serve, the God of the Spirit, or the god of the flesh. The choice is ours.

Rejecting Biblical Truth Ultimately Leads to Despair

How did modern philosophy arrive at such a seemingly absurd state? In the late nineteenth century certain scholars assaulted the Bible and Christian beliefs. This "higher criticism" was promoted by men dedicated to the destruction of orthodox Christianity. In their minds the Bible was no more than a novel, a book of fiction with some good moral lessons. This movement was the spiritual legacy of the Enlightenment which put the claims of religion outside the realm of reason.

Natural law, based on human reason alone, was slowly substituted for biblical law. Christian faith was separated from historic reality. The focus of all studies was shifting from God to man.

The real motive of higher criticism of the Bible was purely ethical. Men and women don't like the idea of having to be obedient to God. Therefore, they denied the historic validity of the Bible. This denial was based on an evolutionary model of human morality and human history. They sought to separate ethics from faith^[17] in order to free themselves from God's final judgment.

Kierkegaard, a 19th century philosopher, is considered the father of existentialism. He took this idea of the separation of faith and reason and said that we could not know God rationally. Therefore, he tried to reach God by what he called an irrational leap of faith. Since it was not rational to believe in God, but it was necessary, you must believe irrationally. Sartre and Camus simply took the next step when they said belief in God was not only irrational, but unnecessary.

Therefore, modern man started the path to a meaningless life when he questioned whether man could know God. Indeed, when man questioned even God's ability to communicate with man, this led the existentialist to ask, "If God is dead, isn't man dead also?" This existential death of man has led to apathy, absurdity and ambiguity. The philosopher Bertrand Russell said it best when he said:

What else is there to make life tolerable? We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and to emptiness. Sometimes a voice of one drowning, and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to me quite dreadful, the unhappiness of many people is very great, and I often wonder how they all endure it. It is usually the central thing around which their lives are built, and I suppose if they

did not live most of their lives in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on.

Rejection of God's grace creates a world of hopeless despair. Existentialism leaves man without hope. In contrast, the Christian has the hope of eternal life based on faith in a living, personal God whom we can personally experience with all our mind, body and spirit.

Can Human Beings Live the Existential Life?

How many of your acquaintances are demonstrating by their lives that they believe there are significant ethical implications in the decisions they make and the activities they are involved in? Do you know people who live life caught up in self-preoccupation, doing only that which gives immediate pleasure? Are they filling their lives with movies, TV, sports and other preoccupations which shield them from dealing with the ethical reality of their lifestyle?

In this essay I have been discussing the ethics of humanistic existentialism, an ethic of freedom in ambiguity. It is an ethic that says man is nothing except what he or she decides to create of themselves and whatever choice they make really doesn't matter.

It sounds absurd, and it is, but sadly it is the ethic often being taught on the college campuses. One philosophy professor at a major university in Texas proudly informs his classes that he is an atheist and that his goal is to show the class that they can develop a system of ethics without a belief in a god. Of course he is right. One can design a set of relativistic ethical standards, but it is an ethic built on sand. An ethic of ambiguity will never give the support these students need in the hard world of reality. Did Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the leading writers in existentialist theory, hold to their position till the end? There is evidence

that they did not. From a dialogue recorded in 1980 when nearing his death, Sartre came very close to belief in God, perhaps even more than very close. He made a statement that may show his acceptance of the grace of God. He said,

I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.

In this one sentence Sartre seems to disavow his entire system of belief, his whole life of dedication to existentialism. If this is true, it is a condemnation of humanistic existentialism by Sartre himself. [{18}](#)

What about Albert Camus? According to Rev. John Warwick Montgomery, an internationally respected Lutheran minister and author, there was a retired pastor of the American Church in Paris who told him that Albert Camus was to have been baptized within the month of his tragic death and that Camus had seen the bankruptcy of humanistic existentialism. [{19}](#)

All this is second hand information, but it does cast a shadow upon the ethics of existential humanism. Either we live a life of hope or of despair. Regardless of the claims made, existential humanism does not leave room for hope. Simone de Beauvoir, the mistress of Sartre and also an existentialist writer, came the closest of any of these writers to the real truth when she said it was reasonable to sacrifice one innocent man that others may live. [{20}](#) This is the foundation of the whole gospel message of Christianity: Jesus Christ, the innocent Son of God, died that all men might be saved. Meanwhile the existentialist stands alone with hope only in one's self. He is alone in a world without Christ, instead of being secure in the knowledge of Christ's love and redemption. Praise God that He is there and He is not silent!

Notes

1. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991), 43, 44.
2. C. Stephen Evans, *The Philosophy of Despair: Existentialism and the Quest for Hope* (Dallas: Probe Books, 1984), 17, 71-72.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Ethics." *Moral Education*. Barry I. Chazan and Jonasa F. Soltis, Eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1973, reprinted from *Existentialism*, New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947), 11-61.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 142.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1965), 627.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 28.
7. Evans, 72.
8. Norman L. Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 40-41.
9. De Beauvoir, 24-25.
10. Evans, 74.
11. Linda A. Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 28.
12. Otto Bollnow, "Existentialism's Basic Ethical Position," *Contemporary European Ethics*, Joseph J. Kockelmans, Ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 332.
13. Philip Thody, *Sartre: A Biographical Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 72.
14. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 23-24.
15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 102, 252-253.
16. Quoted by Stanley L. Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980), 116.
17. Gary North, *The Hoax of Higher Criticism* (Tyler, TX:

Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 9-48.

18. Geisler, 46-47.

19. John Warwick Montgomery, "Letter from England," "On the Reliability of the Four Gospels," *New Oxford Review* (May 1994), 22-24.

20. De Beauvoir, 150.

©1996 Probe Ministries.

How Do You Spell Truth?

What is Truth?

Do you remember the commercial that asked, "How do you spell relief?" To the horror of elementary teachers everywhere, you were supposed to answer "R-O-L-A-I-D-S." In a similar fashion, today, if you ask someone, "How do you spell truth?" you might be surprised by the response. As a young Christian in college, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I will never forget the impact of his critique of modern culture and his use of the phrase "true truth." True truth might be thought of as truth with a capital "T" because it is based on the existence of a personal God, the creator of all that exists, and a revealer of Himself via the Bible and the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus. Today, if you ask average men and women how to spell truth, their responses will probably indicate a view that is strictly earthbound truth beginning with a small "t." God is not in the picture; in fact, belief in God would be seen as a handicap in discerning truth accurately. The methodology of science provides this type of truth and also sets its limits. However, there is another spelling for truth that is finding more and more adherents. Today, especially on college campuses, the question might be

answered with C-O-N-S-T-R-U-C-T, as in social construct. Like the Roloids answer above, this response doesn't seem to fit. In this approach truth is generated by the social group, whether they be white middle-class male Americans or female southeast Asians. What is true for one group may not be true for another, and there is no such thing as universal truth, something that is true for all people, all the time.

These three conceptions of truth describe three comprehensive systems of thought that are active in Western culture and in the U.S. The first (Truth) portrays Christian theism (what some refer to as a pre-modern view). Although this view is still quite popular, many in our churches function as if they were members of the second group which is often classified as a modernist perspective (truth). The third group (truth as social construct) is a fairly recent arrival, but has become highly influential both in academia and in common culture. It has been called postmodernism. People within these three different perspectives see the world quite differently. Until recently, Christians focused their apologetics, or defense of the faith, mainly at modernists and as a result often attempted to justify belief within a modernist framework of truth. Now we are being called upon to respond to a postmodern view that will require a far different approach. Although postmodernism has many aspects that Christians must reject, it has also revealed just how much Christian thinking has been influenced by the modernist challenge.

In this discussion we will look at modernism and postmodernism in light of Christian evangelism and apologetics. We are now fighting a two-front battle, and we need to develop different tools for each. We also are in need of a vaccine against assuming the presuppositions of either modernism or postmodernism as we attempt to live and think within a biblical framework. Much of this debate revolves around the notion of what is true, or perhaps how we as individuals can know what is true. This may sound like an ivory tower

discussion, but it is a vital topic as we attempt to share the truth of the Gospel to those we encounter.

The Modernist View

In their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*^{1}, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh use an interesting metaphor to describe the different views of truth and the ways that we perceive it in our culture. Imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." Each of the umpires may make the same call, but they will be making it for very different reasons. The position of the first ump is known as naive realism. He believes that his calls correspond to something quite real and substantive called balls and strikes. He is also very confident that he can discern what is a ball or a strike with a high degree of accuracy. This confidence is a trademark of modernism. As we will see later, the other two umpires reflect positions that reject such a confidence in knowing what is true. It doesn't mean that they don't make decisions, they just lack the confidence that their decision conforms exactly to what is really "out there."

Modernism grew out of the Enlightenment and matured in the last century to dominate much of European and American thought. Its greatest American advocate has been John Dewey. Writing around the turn of the century, Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism has dominated American educational theory to this day. In his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,^{2} he highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking. First, modernism rejects the reality of supernatural events or beings. It focuses on this world and the secular. Second, it rejects the authority of the church or religion in

general and replaces it with the power of individual minds utilizing the methodology of science. Third, it replaces the static world of the middle ages with a belief in progress towards a future human utopia. Finally, it believes that the patient scientific study of nature will provide the means for this utopia. Humankind is to conquer and control nature for its use.

The implications of modernism were and are profound. Under its umbrella, humans were seen as biological machines just as the universe became understood as an impersonal mechanism needing neither a creator nor a sustainer God. All of human behavior could conceivably be explained biologically, given enough time for science to study the data. As a result, humans are viewed as self-governing beings and free to embrace whatever their rational minds discover. Modernists might be called rationalistic optimists because they are quite confident in their ability to perceive "reality as reality, relatively unaffected by our own bias, distortion, or previous belief system"[\[3\]](#). One's conclusions can reflect reality outside ourselves, not just thoughts within our own minds.

With the advent of modernism Christianity found itself under the cold calculating eye of science. Modernism tells a story of mankind as its own savior that is, with the help of science, modernism has no need for a savior provided by God. Sin is not in its vocabulary, and redemption is not needed; humans lack only education.

Next, we will look at the arrival of postmodernism and its accompanying challenges.

The Postmodern Condition

We have considered the impact of modernism on the question of what is true. Now we will focus on the postmodern view. Where modernism is very confident that it can discover truth via science, postmodernism is defined by its skepticism that truth

of any type can be known. Much of postmodernism is negative response to the confidence of modernism. Yet, postmodernism is a strange combination of a vague romantic optimism that mankind can solve its social and economic problems, with a dramatic pessimism of ever knowing truth at a universal level. This reflects the strong influence of atheistic existentialism on postmodern thinking. Individuals are told they must stand up and confront an absurd existence and impose meaning and order on to it, all the while admitting that there is no universal truth guiding what they choose to do.

To a postmodern, modernism ended with atomic bombs being dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Modernism led to imperialism and the colonialization of the third world by the supposedly more modern and advanced industrial nations. It led to the destruction of the environment, and it has led to a naive confidence that technology can solve any problem in its path.

Often, postmodernism is known more for what it doesn't believe than for what it does. One author writes that we have come to the point where answers to the "questions of ultimate concern about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant." [\[4\]](#)

Let's consider some of the significant themes that postmodernists have written about. The first is the theory that truth is a social construct. This theory would argue, for example, that Western modernity which has come to dominate the globe and define what is rational and normative for human life is not in place because it is any truer than other worldviews. Instead, it is a set of ideas that people have used to manipulate others with in order to gain power over them. Those who are not "scientific" are viewed as primitive and as a result are marginalized and finally oppressed by Western culture. Western culture, then, has not discovered how things really are; instead, it has imposed one view on the world to

its advantage. Our basic problem is that all ideas, all concepts, and all truths are communicated via language, and all language is man made. No one can step outside of language to see whether or not it corresponds with reality. In the words of one postmodernist, all principles (or ultimate truths) are really preferences.

As a result of postmodernist thinking, anyone who claims to know something that is universally true, true for everyone, everywhere, anytime, is accused of marginalizing those who disagree. Once a person or group is marginalized, a justification has been established to oppress them. To postmodernists, a totalizing meta-narrative (a story that claims to answer all the big questions about reality) always results in violence towards those outside the accepted paradigm. They point to Western culture's aptitude towards conquering and destroying other cultures in the name of progress and modernization.

One can easily see that a Christian worldview conflicts with much of what postmodernity teaches. Christianity claims to be true for everyone, everywhere. It is not surprising that postmodern feminists and others have pointed their finger at Christianity for oppressing women, gays, and anyone else who holds to a different construct of reality. How do we as Christians respond to this critique? Do we side with the modernists and join the fight against postmodern influences? Or can we find something helpful in the issues raised by postmodernism?

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen argues that, "When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it." Another has written that modernity has given us "as much terror as we can take."⁵ Postmodernists argue that by claiming to know the truth we automatically marginalize and oppress others. It encourages the questioning of everything that modernism has come to accept as natural or

good. Capitalism, patriarchy, and liberal humanism are just a few ideas that modernity has left us with and that we have to realize are just social constructs. We are free, according to postmoderns, to throw off anything that doesn't work since all institutions and social norms are social constructs created by society itself. However, with this freedom comes disorientation. The current social scene in America is a prime example of this effect. Traditions about family, gender roles, economic responsibility, and social norms are being questioned and abandoned. This has left us with a sense of loss, a horrifying loss that acknowledges that there is nothing solid undergirding why we live the way we do. It has left us with an amazing amount of pluralism and a radical multiculturalism that some feel has removed essential buffers to chaos.

The confidence of modern man in rugged individualism has been deconstructed by postmodernism to reveal the inevitability of violence and subjugation. What is left? Many postmodernists argue that not only is the self a construct, that the autonomous self is a myth, but that the self is actually a servant of language. Most people see language as a tool to be used by individuals to express ideas to another person. Many postmodernists see things quite differently. They would argue that our language uses us instead. Another way of thinking of this is that we don't have a language, a language has us. All that we know of reality is given to us by the symbols present in our language. This has created a self-identity problem of dramatic proportions for postmoderns. Many have responded by embracing this lack of rootedness by seeing that life is being in a "state of continuous construction and reconstruction."

Now that we have briefly surveyed both the modern and postmodern positions, let's begin to think about them from a biblical standpoint. We should first acknowledge that when doing apologetics, or defending the faith, we are not merely attempting to win arguments or make others look foolish. Apologetics should always be done in the context of

evangelism, the goal of which is to share the gospel in a meaningful way, to convey the truth of special revelation concerning God's plan for salvation with humility and compassion.

Christians should probably reject both the confidence of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism regarding our ability to know and understand truth. Modernity's dependence on science as the only valid source for truth is too limited and fails to consider the effects of the fall on our ability to know something without bias. We are often sinfully rational, willfully rejecting what is true. On the other hand, the postmodern view leaves us without hope that we can know anything about what is really real. It holds that we are literally a prisoner of the language game played by our culture group, regardless of its social class or race.

Next, we will consider how postmodern thinking should affect evangelism.

A Christian View of Truth

We have been considering the challenges of modern and postmodern thinking to the notion of truth and the communication of the Gospel. Earlier we used the metaphor of umpires who call strikes and balls within different frameworks for knowing. The ump who "calls 'em the way they are" is a naive realist; the second ump who "calls 'em like he sees 'em" represents the critical realist view, and the ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" portrays a radical perspectivist view. The questions before us are, What view should a Christian take? and How does this choice affect the way in which we do apologetics and evangelism?

If we accept the view of the first ump who "calls 'em the way they are," we have adopted a modernist perspective. Unfortunately, experience tells us that the assumptions that come with this view don't seem to hold up. It assumes that

common sense and logic will always lead people to the Truth of the Gospel we just need to give people enough evidence. While this approach does work with some, it works mainly because they already agree with us on a theistic, Western view of reality. However, modernism has also led many to see the universe as a godless machine run by the logical laws of nature as discovered by science. For example, New Agers or Hindus have a common understanding that leads them elsewhere. Their basic assumptions about reality are quite different from ours, and it is much more difficult to find common ground with them. In fact, they have consciously rejected the Western view of reality.

The third ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" sees truth as entirely personal. Although we admit that people do create personal frameworks for interpreting life and reality, there is ultimately only one true reality, one true God. However, we might learn from the perspectivist in order to find common ground when witnessing. One commonality is the notion of an acute consciousness of suffering by marginalized people. Christianity shares this concern yet offers a radically different solution.

The second umpire states that there are balls and strikes, and "I call 'em as I see 'em." This view of truth, called critical realism, recognizes that there is one true reality, but that our ability to perceive it is limited. The Bible teaches that sin has distorted our view. Even as believers we must admit that we don't always understand why God does what He does. This is partially because truth is personal in the sense that it is rooted in a personal God, and we can never know all that there is to know about Him. Even Peter, who walked with Christ, didn't understand God's plans. He rebuked Jesus when Jesus told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and resurrected.

The best evangelistic approach attempts to find common ground with an unbeliever while never relinquishing all that is true

of the Christian worldview. If rational, logical arguments are persuasive, use them. If storytelling works, as in the more narratively oriented societies of the Middle East, use it. We should not be limited to either a modernist or postmodernist view of truth, but work from a distinctively Christian perspective that holds that the God who created the universe wants us to gently instruct others in the hope that He will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.
2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 47-49.
3. Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 23-26.
4. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.
5. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, p. 35.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 52.

©1996 Probe Ministries.

The Morality of the West

Cheating in the Schools

According to a study by Rutgers University, over 70% of all university students admit they have cheated at least once. And there's probably a few more who wouldn't admit it. The most common form of cheating admitted to is plagiarism. Students have always copied from someone else's paper or stealthily brought forbidden notes into the classroom. But the incidence is rising. Nineteen percent admit they have faked a bibliography, and fourteen percent say they have handed in a computer program written by someone else. [{1}](#)

This report highlights the fact that many students today are either unable or unwilling to act in an ethical manner. William Kilpatrick, in his book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, brings to light the millions of crimes committed yearly on or near school property. Children go to school scared and intimidated. Many teachers contemplate and actually do leave the profession because of all the discipline and behavior problems. [{2}](#) A professor of philosophy at Clark University says:

Students come to college today as moral stutterers. They haven't been taught much respect for what I call "plain moral facts," the need for honesty, integrity, responsibility. It doesn't take a blue-ribbon commission to see this. Students don't reason morally. They don't know what that means. [{3}](#)

Also, Mr. Michael Josephson, founder and president of the Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics, said "Far too many young people have abandoned traditional ethical values in favor of self-absorbed, win-at-any-cost attitudes that threaten to unravel the moral fabric of American society." [{4}](#) This "self-absorbed" attitude is based on a whole

new set of assumptions about how we should adopt our values and the right of individuals to construct their own values.

Where do these ideas come from? Are our young people only now discovering the difference between what their parents have preached to them and what they actually do? Is it simply due to the fact that society is changing? Or is this an ethical vacuum caused by a value system without a solid foundation?

Some have suggested that we have simply discovered more efficient ways of uncovering people's wrongdoing so it just seems that people are less moral in their dealings. In other words, we are just more aware of the imperfections that were always there. A more interesting question, however is whether the behavior is the result of values being communicated by society? Have the rules changed? and who makes these rules, God or men? The Christian and the theist turn toward the Creator of the Universe. The humanist or atheist turns toward himself. This distinction between theism and humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory.

It appears that we are rapidly approaching a Godless, valueless society in which "power ethics" or the "political rationalism" of humanism is replacing the Judeo-Christian ethical base of traditional morality. The roots of our present dilemma go all the way back to the secular humanism of the fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Renaissance, and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idea of the sufficiency of human reason grew stronger during these periods, continually challenging Judeo- Christian values in an increasingly sophisticated way. Humanity was placed at the center of the universe, rather than God.

The Moral Results of Reason Alone

Just as our Lord said that man cannot live by bread alone, so man cannot live by reason alone. If we exclude revelation as a source of direction in discovering who man is and rely solely

on our intellect, and our own ideas of how we came to be, then we will naturally slip into a pessimistic and ultimately depressing view of human nature.

The seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke said that all knowledge comes from sensation. In other words, the only reality is what we can see, hear, feel, smell, taste, or measure. Not much room for revelation here. Other philosophers have followed up on this idea and have concluded that man is shaped by evolutionary processes and the culture that surrounds us. The notion that man is born with some innate nature has been rejected. Men like Hegel, Darwin, and Marx believed that all living forms and social systems were nothing more than the result of progressive transformations over time. As the influence of the religious community began to wane in the nineteenth century, many began to search for a meaning to life totally apart from God. Man simply no longer believed he had a place in eternity. Therefore all he could do was hope to find his place in the movement of history. [\[5\]](#)

Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* catapulted the abandonment of God and revelation by attempting to show that God was not even necessary in the creation of living things. If God did not create us, then we certainly could not gain our sense of meaning and purpose from a book purportedly written by Him. Frederich Nietzsche purposed to highlight the ethical implications of Darwinism. Nietzsche's "superman" concept transformed man into the maker of his own destiny. Man was truly the measure of all things. If God is dead, as Nietzsche declared, and nature is all there is, then what is, is right. Human life was therefore stripped of any purpose or goal. The contemporary Harvard professor, E. O. Wilson has stated, "No species, ours included, possesses a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its genetic history." Elsewhere he declares that our dilemma is that "we have no particular place to go. The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature." This will ultimately result in a sense of

hopelessness, pessimism, apathy, and absurdity. William Kilpatrick in his book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, says "Suicides among young people have risen by 300 percent over the last thirty years." {6} Next to accidents it is now the second leading cause of death in teenagers. Many of the deaths due to accidents are the result of auto accidents in which alcohol has played a role which can also be traced back to a sense of hopelessness and despair. Young people who may have never heard of Nietzsche are nevertheless living their lives in accordance with his philosophy of living recklessly.

A group of scholars presented the case of biblical authority to a group of students at Princeton University. At the conclusion of their presentation, a student stood and said:

I am surprised that I found myself feeling that you two were right and all of us were wrong, at least insofar as this very basic point: why we stand where we stand makes all the difference in the world. So the weakness of your presentation was that you were arguing on the basis of logic and presuppositions and intellectual integrity with persons who are perfectly ready to dispense with all three. {7}

Our young people are so far removed from a rational discussion of what is right and what is wrong that they are unable to even decide what criterion should be used to make the decision, let alone make the decision itself. This is the inevitable result of the philosophical trend to utilize human reason alone apart from the revelation in Scripture. As our creator, God alone has the authority and knowledge to inform us as to how we are to act. Left to ourselves, we will only be confused.

Why Are Biblical Values No Longer Taught in Schools?

Many students today are so confused that they not only don't

know what ethical system is valid, but they don't even know how to evaluate them. One might ask, why aren't the schools teaching the values our children need, values that will work for them rather than against them?

To understand the lack of values being taught in our educational institutions, we need to go back to the biblical critics who were writing in Germany in the nineteenth century. The product of an attempt to operate by human reason alone, this movement placed the claims of religion and particularly the Bible outside the realm of human reason. If the Bible was not reasonable, then the Scriptures lost their foundation in real history. The traditions of the faith were seen as merely that, tradition with no basis in reality. This meant that the events contained in the Bible were to be evaluated on whether they were reasonable within a universe where the supernatural was assumed to be nonexistent or at least not involved in the real world. These scholars, called higher critics, believed that all morality is totally relative to historical time and place. The laws of the Bible were now to be seen as being understood only within the times that the Bible was describing. A Sabbath was only useful to an agrarian and shepherding culture. The same would be true for adultery or taking the Lord's name in vain.

This approach essentially denies the unity and moral integrity of the entire Bible.^{8} The end result is that in people's minds, their ethics became separated from their faith. This eventually resulted in deism, a view that says that God only provided the necessary input to get the universe started but left it completely on its own after creation. He never intervened in natural or human history again. God is still there, but there is no possibility of any communication between God and His creation. Well, if you can't communicate with God and He has no influence over your life, why bother with worrying whether God existed at all? The worldview of naturalism quickly follows which says that there is no God.

Nietzsche's "madman" said, "God is dead!"^{9} God was now out of the picture. Nietzsche simply took the next step. He tried to force men and women to, "feel the breath of empty space." If you have been following the train of thought here you are probably beginning to see the connection between Nietzsche's ideas and the state of our youth today. Many young people feel that there is no grand purpose for their life. Life is empty and cheap. If you believe in some form of a grand purpose, it is really only a grand illusion. All that is left, therefore, is to live for the pleasure of the moment. Gain what pleasure you can in an absurd universe. This will ultimately lead to an attitude of despair. If God is dead, what's the use of conforming to any rules. If I die as a result of my actions, so what, life is absurd anyway.

Students today often seem to be lost in relativism and are unable to think about or look into their futures. They shrivel up within the confines of their immediate surroundings. There is no longer any hope in eternity or in real justice.

Many of today's young people wander about their school halls with no hope, no dreams, no optimism about their future. Rock groups such as *Nirvana* and *Nine Inch Nails* continually fill their heads with the meaninglessness of a universe in which God is dead and life is absurd. We should be filled with great sadness when we witness the destruction this kind of thinking results in such as the suicide of Nirvana's heart and soul, Curt Cobain. I believe we should also see such people as Jesus does, as lost sheep. They are a great mission field for which the truth and historical reality of the gospel can find fertile ground.

The Twentieth Century Results of a "God Is Dead" Universe

The Greek philosopher Plato understood that there must be some universal or absolute under which the individual things (the

particulars, the details) must fit. Something beyond the everyday must be there to give it all unity and meaning. Even the atheist and existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, realized that a finite point is absurd if it has no infinite reference point.[{10}](#) Sartre chose to believe that this infinite reference point did not exist, therefore, the only thing worth doing is existing and making choices, regardless of what those choices may be. But how can we tell students, our children, that anything is right or wrong if there is no absolute reference point such as the Bible, to base this on?

Existentialism says that we need to make a “leap of faith”[{11}](#) and seek to find our meaning without reason. In other words, we just have to find what works for us. And as we go through life, what works will constantly be changing. If we actually try to think about it, if we try to rationalize a meaning, we will only get depressed. According to existentialism, the only way to be happy, is to not think, to be blindly optimistic.

Another perspective is power ethics or “political naturalism.” Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a great voice in the revival of political naturalism in the sixteenth century. In his book *The Prince*, a ruler who wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.[{12}](#) In other words, do what you need to do to preserve your position and don't concern yourself with what is ethical. Just preserve your power. Machiavelli's ethical stance of whatever strengthens the state is right had a great influence on the thinking of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Feuerbach's claim that God was merely a human invention had a lot to do with the writings of Karl Marx (1819-1883) who took these ideas as validation of his own views. His ideas provided a foundation upon which Lenin and Stalin were able to build a society around the power ethics of political rationalism. Feuerbach and Marx rejoiced in the fact that the losing grasp of religion had made it possible to create a city of man in an entirely human

space.[{13}](#) In Russia there was a concerted attempt to root out Christianity and substitute an extremely intolerant and militant form of the religion of the Enlightenment.[{14}](#)

Adolph Hitler is another example. So profound was Nietzsche's philosophy upon Hitler, that it provided the framework for his tireless efforts to obliterate the Jews and the weak of this world.[{15}](#) Nietzsche had proclaimed the coming of the Master Race, and a Superman who would unify Germany and perhaps the world.[{16}](#) Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*, clearly announced his intent to take Nietzsche's logic and drive the atheistic worldview to its logical conclusion. In Nietzschean terms, atheism will inevitably lead to violence and hedonism.[{17}](#) Hitler personally presented a copy of Nietzsche's works to Benito Mussolini, and Mussolini submitted a thesis on Machiavelli for his doctor's degree.

When human reason is allowed to be unaccountable it becomes solely a function of power, it legitimatizes the construction of a totalitarian state and in the case of Hitler the end result was the Holocaust. The real legacy of unbridled humanism is terror.[{18}](#)

The Purification of Moral Relativism

We construct museums so that we may never forget the horror of the German Holocaust. Russia is trying to recover from a total collapse of a power structure that was based on political rationalism and historical materialism. They had to find out the hard way. The fundamental dogma of the Enlightenment, the natural goodness and/or reasonableness of man, is a myth at best. It was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who related what he overheard two old peasants say during the blood baths of Stalin's regime, "It is because we have forgotten God. That is why all this is happening to us." Out of the rubble of a failed system rose a people desperate to reestablish an ethical base that will work for them rather than against them. An article in *USA Today* illustrates a new hope for values in

Russia. It reports that:

Officials say up to 55% of Russian teachers, many of whom were former atheists, have made personal commitments to Christ. Many are using the New Testament in schools. "For ages, (Russia) was a country of believers and morality was very close to the people," says assistant principal Olga Meinikova, 32, of school No. 788. "For a short period 74 years we lost it all. All Russian teachers should teach this course; Americans too. The Bible is part of normal education."[{19}](#)

Teams of Americans are helping to train Russian teachers how to teach Judeo-Christian morals and values based on a system of biblical ethics. The military has also been retraining their staff in Judeo-Christian morality, ethics, and values. Russia reached the bottom of a Godless society and is making an effort to rebuild its ethical base.

We face a dilemma in Western culture. We can continue along the line of thinking that "reason" is our only hope and trust in the natural goodness and/or reasonableness of man. Another extreme is to throw out reason altogether and embrace the philosophy and religion of the new age. The biblical view is to return to the concept of the fallen nature of mankind and rebuild on the traditional base of historic Christianity, which puts reason under the authority of Scripture. This is the traditional basis for ethical teaching in Western culture. It applies to all our institutions of training, including churches and ministries. The ethics modeled by too many Christian leaders is at best a utilitarian form of ethics. At worst, it is a pragmatic form of ethics that serves the self-centered goals of the individual or institution.

In conclusion, ethics based on Enlightenment thinking is not the answer. Crane Brinton, in his book *A History of Western Morals* says, "the religion of the Enlightenment has a long and

unpredictable way to go before it can face the facts of life as effectively as does Christianity.”^{20} We appear to have an implosion of values in a society. Many are seeking to teach our children that there is no God and no afterlife, but if you live an ethical life it will pay off. It is a standard without a foundation, floating in mid air. Society must re-evaluate its commitment to Enlightenment ethics and thinking. Until it does, we will see a continuing loss of values and respect for humanity.

Notes

1. “College A Cheating Haven,” *Parents of Teenagers*, Feb/Mar 1992, p. 5.
2. Kilpatrick, William. *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 14.
3. Marquand, Robert. “Moral Education.” *Ethics, Easier Said Than Done*. Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 1988, p. 34.
4. “U.S. Youths’ Ethics Alarming, Study Says.” *The Dallas Morning News*, 15 November 1992, p. 5A.
5. Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time & Space 1880-1918*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1983, p. 51.
6. Kilpatrick, 14.
7. Update, International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Spring 1979.
8. North, Gary. *The Hoax of Higher Criticism*. Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989, p. 33.
9. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 41.
10. Schaeffer, Francis A. *How Should We Then Live?* Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1976, p. 145.
11. Schacht, Richard. *Hegel and After: Studies in Continental Philosophy Between Kant and Sartre*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975, p. 5.
12. Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977, p. 44.
13. Kern, 178.
14. Brinton, Crane. *A History of Western Morals*. New York:

Paragon House, 1990, p. 472.

15. Zacharias, Ravi. *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1990, p. 17.

16. Lutzer, Erwin W. *Hitler's Cross*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, p. 27.

17. Zacharias, 26.

18. Levin, David Michael. *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. New York: Routledge, Capman & Hall, 1988, p. 4.

19. *USA Today*, Tuesday, 18 May 1993, 9A.

20. Brinton, 462.

©1996 Probe Ministries.