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 Tappen, 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 Hiedigger. 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 lead 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 Rolaids 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 loosing 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.

The Problem of Evil

Rick Rood helps us understand the challenging question of evil and why it is allowed to remain in this world. Speaking from a Christian worldview perspective, he gives us a thorough understanding of how Christians should consider and deal with evil in this world. The Bible does not shirk from addressing the nature and existence of evil AND our responsibility to stand against it.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Problem of Evil – Introduction

John Stott has said that "the fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." It is unquestionably true that there is no greater obstacle to faith than that of the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Indeed, even for the believing Christian, there is no greater test of faith than this—that the God who loves him permits him to suffer, at times in excruciating ways. And the disillusionment is intensified in our day when unrealistic expectations of health and prosperity are fed by the teachings of a multitude of Christian teachers. Why does a good God allow his creatures, and even his children to suffer?

First, it's important to distinguish between two kinds of evil: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil results from the actions of free creatures. Murder, rape and theft are examples. Natural evil results from natural processes such as earthquakes and floods. Of course, sometimes the two are intermingled, such as when flooding results in loss of human life due to poor planning or shoddy construction of buildings.

It's also important to identify two aspects of the problem of evil and suffering. First, there is the philosophical or

apologetic aspect. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the skeptic who challenges the possibility or probability that a God exists who would allow such suffering. In meeting this apologetic challenge we must utilize the tools of reason and evidence in "giving a reason for the hope within us." (I Pet. 3:15)

Second is the religious or emotional aspect of the problem of evil. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the believer whose faith in God is severely tested by trial. How can we love and worship God when He allows us to suffer in these ways? In meeting the religious/emotional challenge we must appeal to the truth revealed by God in Scripture. We will address both aspects of the problem of evil in this essay.

It's also helpful to distinguish between two types of the philosophical or apologetic aspect of the problem of evil. The first is the logical challenge to belief in God. This challenge says it is irrational and hence impossible to believe in the existence of a good and powerful God on the basis of the existence of evil in the world. The logical challenge is usually posed in the form of a statement such as this:

1. A good God would destroy evil.
2. An all powerful God could destroy evil.
3. Evil is not destroyed.
4. Therefore, there cannot possibly be such a good and powerful God.

It is logically impossible to believe that both evil, and a good and powerful God exist in the same reality, for such a God certainly could and would destroy evil.

On the other hand, the evidential challenge contends that while it may be rationally possible to believe such a God exists, it is highly improbable or unlikely that He does. We

have evidence of so much evil that is seemingly pointless and of such horrendous intensity. For what valid reason would a good and powerful God allow the amount and kinds of evil which we see around us?

These issues are of an extremely important nature—not only as we seek to defend our belief in God, but also as we live out our Christian lives.{1}

The Logical Problem of Evil

We have noted that there are two aspects of the problem of evil: the philosophical or apologetic, and the religious or emotional aspect. We also noted that within the philosophical aspect there are two types of challenges to faith in God: the logical and the evidential.

David Hume, the eighteenth century philosopher, stated the logical problem of evil when he inquired about God, "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (Craig, 80). When the skeptic challenges belief in God on the basis of the logical problem of evil, he is suggesting that it is irrational or logically impossible to believe in the existence of both a good and all powerful God and in the reality of evil and suffering. Such a God would not possibly allow evil to exist.

The key to the resolution of this apparent conflict is to recognize that when we say God is all powerful, we do not imply that He is capable of doing anything imaginable. True, Scripture states that "with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26). But Scripture also states that there are some things God cannot do. For instance, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). Neither can He be tempted to sin, nor can He tempt others to sin (James 1:13). In other words, He cannot do anything that is "out of character" for a righteous God. Neither can He do anything that is out of character for a rational being in a

rational world. Certainly even God cannot “undo the past,” or create a square triangle, or make what is false true. He cannot do what is irrational or absurd.

And it is on this basis that we conclude that God could not eliminate evil without at the same time rendering it impossible to accomplish other goals which are important to Him. Certainly, for God to create beings in his own image, who are capable of sustaining a personal relationship with Him, they must be beings who are capable of freely loving Him and following his will without coercion. Love or obedience on any other basis would not be love or obedience at all, but mere compliance. But creatures who are free to love God must also be free to hate or ignore Him. Creatures who are free to follow His will must also be free to reject it. And when people act in ways outside the will of God, great evil and suffering is the ultimate result. This line of thinking is known as the “free will defense” concerning the problem of evil.

But what about natural evil—evil resulting from natural processes such as earthquakes, floods and diseases? Here it is important first to recognize that we live in a fallen world, and that we are subject to natural disasters that would not have occurred had man not chosen to rebel against God. Even so, it is difficult to imagine how we could function as free creatures in a world much different than our own—a world in which consistent natural processes allow us to predict with some certainty the consequences of our choices and actions. Take the law of gravity, for instance. This is a natural process without which we could not possibly function as human beings, yet under some circumstances it is also capable of resulting in great harm.

Certainly, God is capable of destroying evil—but not without destroying human freedom, or a world in which free creatures can function. And most agree that this line of reasoning does successfully respond to the challenge of the logical problem

of evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

While most agree that belief in a good and powerful God is rationally possible, nonetheless many contend that the existence of such a God is improbable due to the nature of the evil which we see in the world about us. They conclude that if such a God existed it is highly unlikely that He would allow the amount and intensity of evil which we see in our world. Evil which frequently seems to be of such a purposeless nature.

This charge is not to be taken lightly, for evidence abounds in our world of evil of such a horrendous nature that it is difficult at times to fathom what possible purpose it could serve. However, difficult as this aspect of the problem of evil is, careful thinking will show that there are reasonable responses to this challenge.

Surely it is difficult for us to understand why God would allow some things to happen. But simply because we find it difficult to imagine what reasons God could have for permitting them, does not mean that no such reasons exist. It is entirely possible that such reasons are not only beyond our present knowledge, but also beyond our present ability to understand. A child does not always understand the reasons that lie behind all that his father allows or does not allow him to do. It would be unrealistic for us to expect to understand all of God's reasons for allowing all that He does. We do not fully understand many things about the world we live in—what lies behind the force of gravity for instance, or the exact function of subatomic particles. Yet we believe in these physical realities.

Beyond this, however, we can suggest possible reasons for God allowing some of the horrendous evils which do exist in our world. Perhaps there are people who would never sense their

utter dependence on God apart from experiencing the intense pain that they do in life (Ps. 119:71). Perhaps there are purposes that God intends to accomplish among his angelic or demonic creatures which require his human creatures to experience some of the things that we do (Job 1-2). It may be that the suffering we experience in this life is somehow preparatory to our existence in the life to come (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Even apart from the revelation of Scripture, these are all possible reasons behind God's permission of evil. And at any rate, most people agree that there is much more good in the world than evil—at least enough good to make life well worth the living.

In responding to the challenge to belief in God based on the intensity and seeming purposelessness of much evil in the world, we must also take into account all of the positive evidence that points to his existence: the evidence of design in nature, the historical evidence for the reliability of Scripture and of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In light of the totality of the evidence, it certainly cannot be proven that there are no sufficient reasons for God's allowing the amount of evil that we see in the world…or even that it is improbable that such reasons exist.

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part I

But the existence of evil and suffering in our world poses more than a merely philosophical or apologetic problem. It also poses a very personal religious and emotional problem for the person who is enduring great trial. Although our painful experience may not challenge our belief that God exists, what may be at risk is our confidence in a God we can freely worship and love, and in whose love we can feel secure. Much harm can be done when we attempt to aid a suffering brother or sister by merely dealing with the intellectual aspects of this problem, or when we seek to find solace for ourselves in this way. Far more important than answers about the nature of God,

is a revelation of the love of God—even in the midst of trial. And as God's children, it is not nearly as important what we say about God as what we do to manifest his love.

First, it is evident from Scripture that when we suffer it is not unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor is it unspiritual to express it. It is noteworthy for instance that there are nearly as many psalms of lament as there are psalms of praise and thanksgiving, and these two sentiments are mingled together in many places (cf. Pss. 13, 88). Indeed, the psalmist encourages us to "pour out our hearts to God" (Ps. 62:8). And when we do, we can be assured that God understands our pain. Jesus Himself keenly felt the painful side of life. When John the Baptist was beheaded it is recorded that "He withdrew to a lonely place" obviously to mourn his loss (Mt. 14:13). And when his friend Lazarus died, it is recorded that Jesus openly wept at his tomb (Jn. 11:35). Even though He was committed to following the Father's will to the cross, He confessed to being filled with anguish of soul in contemplating it (Mt. 26:38). It is not without reason that Jesus was called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3); and we follow in his steps when we truthfully acknowledge our own pain.

We cross the line, however, from sorrow to sin when we allow our grief to quench our faith in God, or follow the counsel that Job was offered by his wife when she told him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9b).

Secondly, when we suffer we should draw comfort from reflecting on Scriptures which assure us that God knows and cares about our situation, and promises to be with us to comfort and uphold us. The psalmist tells us that "the Lord is near to the brokenhearted" (Ps. 34:18), and that when we go through the "valley of the shadow of death" it is then that his presence is particularly promised to us (Ps. 23:4). Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the

son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15). He is more mindful of us than is a nursing mother toward her child! It is of the One whom we know as the "God of all comfort and Father of mercies" that Peter speaks when He bids us to cast our anxieties on Him, "for He cares for us" (1 Pet. 5:7). Our cares are his personal concern!

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part II

We noted that when suffering strikes it is neither unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor unspiritual to express it. But we also noted that when suffering strikes, we must be quick to reflect on the character of God and on the promises He gives to those who are enduring great trial. Now we want to focus on one of the great truths of God's Word—that even in severe trial God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). This is not at all to imply that evil is somehow good. But it does mean that we are to recognize that even in what is evil God is at work to bring about his good purposes in our lives.

Joseph gave evidence of having learned this truth when after years of unexplained suffering due to the betrayal of his brothers, he was able to say to them, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Though God did not cause his brothers to betray him, nonetheless He was able to use it in furthering his good intentions.

This is the great hope we have in the midst of suffering, that in a way beyond our comprehension, God is able to turn evil against itself. And it is because of this truth that we can find joy even in the midst of sorrow and pain. The apostle Paul described himself as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). And we are counseled to rejoice in trial, not because the affliction itself is a cause for joy (it is not), but because in it God can find an occasion for producing what is good.

What are some of those good purposes suffering promotes? For one, suffering can provide an opportunity for God to display his glory—to make evident his mercy, faithfulness, power and love in the midst of painful circumstances (Jn. 9:1-3). Suffering can also allow us to give proof of the genuineness of our faith, and even serve to purify our faith (1 Pet. 1:7). As in the case of Job, our faithfulness in trial shows that we serve Him not merely for the benefits He offers, but for the love of God Himself (Job 1:9-11). Severe trial also provides an opportunity for believers to demonstrate their love for one another as members of the body of Christ who "bear one another's burdens" (1 Cor 12:26; Gal. 6:2). Indeed, as D.A. Carson has said, "experiences of suffering… engender compassion and empathy…, and make us better able to help others" (Carson, 122). As we are comforted by God in affliction, so we are better able to comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4). Suffering also plays a key role in developing godly virtues, and in deterring us from sin. Paul recognized that his "thorn in the flesh" served to keep him from boasting, and promoted true humility and dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:7). The psalmist recognized that his affliction had increased his determination to follow God's will (Ps. 119:71). Even Jesus "learned obedience from the things He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). As a man He learned by experience the value of submitting to the will of God, even when it was the most difficult thing in the world to do.

Finally, evil and suffering can awaken in us a greater hunger for heaven, and for that time when God's purposes for these experiences will have been finally fulfilled, when pain and sorrow shall be no more (Rev. 21:4).

Note

1. The line of reasoning in the first three sections of this article can be found in many sources on the problem of evil. Chapters 3 and 4 of William Lane Craig's book cited in the resources below has served as a general guide for my comments

here.

Resources for Further Study:

• Blocker, Henri. *Evil and the Cross*. Tr. by David G. Preston. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
• Briggs, Lauren. *What You Can Say…When You Don't Know What to Say: Reaching Out to Those Who Hurt*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985.
• Carson, D.A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990.
• Craig, William Lane. *No Easy Answers: Finding Hope in Doubt, Failure, and Unanswered Prayer*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1990.
• Dobson, James. *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993.
• Dunn, Ronald. *When Heaven is Silent: Live by Faith, Not by Sight*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994.
• Feinberg, John S. *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
• Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Deserted by God?* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.
• Geisler, Norman L. *The Roots of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.
• Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986.
• Lockyer, Herbert. *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1979.
• McGrath, Alister E. *Suffering & God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.
• Plantinga, Alvin C. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974.

©1996 Probe Ministries.

Human Nature

Don Closson provides an overview to how naturalism, pantheism and Christian theism view human nature. He discusses questions considering how each view deals with purpose, good and evil, and death.

In the twenty-five years prior to 1993, the federal government spent 2.5 trillion dollars on welfare and aid to cities. This was enough money to buy all the assets of the top Fortune 500 firms as well as all the farmland in America at that time.({1} As part of the Great War on poverty, begun by the Johnson administration in the 1960's, the government's goal was to reduce the number of poor, and the effects of poverty on American society. As one administration official put it, "The way to eliminate poverty is to give the poor people enough money so that they won't be poor anymore."{2}) Sounds simple. But offering money didn't get rid of poverty; in fact, just the opposite has occurred. The number of children covered by the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program has gone from 4.5 percent of all children in America in 1965, to almost 13 percent of all children in 1991. One of the reasons for this increase has been the rapid deterioration of the family for those most affected by the welfare bureaucracy. Since 1960, the number of single parent families has more than tripled, reflecting high rates of children born out of wedlock and high divorce rates.{3} Rather than strengthening the family in America and ridding the country of poverty, just the opposite has occurred. Why such disastrous results from such good intentions?

Part of the answer must be found in human nature itself. Might it be, that those creating welfare policy in the 1960's had a faulty view of human nature and thus misread what the solution to poverty should be? In this essay I will look at how three different world views—theism, naturalism, and pantheism—view human nature. Which view we adopt, both individually and as a

people, will have a great influence on how we educate our children, how and if we punish criminals, and how we run our government.

Christian theism is often chided as being simplistic and lacking in sophistication, yet on this subject, it is the naturalist and pantheist who tend to be reductionistic. Both will simplify human nature in a way that detracts from our uniqueness and God-given purpose here on this planet. It should be mentioned that the views of Christian theists, naturalists, and pantheists are mutually exclusive. They might all be wrong, but they cannot all be right. The naturalist sees man as a biological machine that has evolved by chance. The pantheist perceives humankind as forgetful deity, whose essence is a complex series of energy fields which are hidden by an illusion of this apparent physical reality. Christian theism accepts the reality of both our physical and spiritual natures, presenting a balanced, livable view of what it means to be human.

In this essay I will show how Christian theism, naturalism, and pantheism answer three important questions concerning the nature of humanity. First, are humans special in any way; do we have a purpose and origin that sets us apart from the rest of the animal world? Second, are we good, evil, or neither? Third, what happens when we die? These fundamental questions have been asked since the written word appeared and are central to what we believe about ourselves.

Are Humans Special?

One doesn’t usually think of Hollywood’s Terminator, as played by Arnold Schwartzenegger, as a profound thinker. Yet in *Terminator II*, the robot sent back from the future to protect a young boy asks a serious question.

> Boy: *“You were going to kill that guy!”*

Terminator: *“Of course! I’m a terminator.”*

Boy: *“Listen to me very carefully, OK? You’re not a terminator anymore. All right? You got that?! You just can’t go around killing people!”*

Terminator: *“Why?”*

Boy: *“What do ya mean, Why? ‘Cause you can’t!”*

Terminator: *“Why?”*

Boy: *“Because you just can’t, OK? Trust me on this!”*{4}

Indeed, why not terminate people? Why are they special? To a naturalist, one who believes that no spiritual reality exists, options to this question are few. Natural scientists like astronomer Carl Sagan and entomologist E.O. Wilson find man to be no more than a product of time plus chance, an accident of mindless evolution. Psychologist Sigmund Freud and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre agree, humankind is a biological machine, perhaps slightly more complex than other animals, but governed by the same physical needs and drives.

Yet as Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame put it in the original *Star Trek* movie, logic and knowledge aren’t always enough. He discovered this by mind melding with V-GER, a man made machine that, after leaving our solar system, evolves into a thinking machine elsewhere in the galaxy and returns to earth to find its creator.{5} If logic and knowledge aren’t enough, where do we turn to for significance or purpose? A naturalist has nowhere to turn. For example, Sartre argued that man must make his own meaning in the face of an absurd universe.{6} The best that entomologist E. O. Wilson could come up with is that we do whatever it takes to pass on our genetic code, our DNA, to the next generation. Everything we do is based on promoting survival and reproduction.{7}

Pantheists have a very different response to the question of human purpose or uniqueness. Dr. Brough Joy, a medical doctor who has accepted an Eastern view of reality, argues that all life forms are divine, consisting of complex energy fields. In fact, the entire universe is ultimately made up of this energy; the appearance of a physical reality is really an illusion.{8} Gerald Jampolsky, another doctor, argues that love is the only part of us that is real, but love itself cannot be defined.{9} This is all very consistent with pantheism which teaches a radical monism, that all is one, and all is god. But if all is god, all is just as it is supposed to be and you end up with statements like this from the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh:

> There is no purpose to life; existence is non-purposive. That is why it is called a leela, a play. Existence itself has no purpose to fulfill. It is not going anywhere—there is no end that it is moving toward…{10}

Christianity teaches that human beings are unique. We are created in God's image and for a purpose, to glorify God. Genesis 1:26 declares our image-bearing nature and the mandate to rule over the other creatures of God's creation. Jesus further delineated our purpose when he gave us the two commandments to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Romans 12:1 calls us to be living sacrifices to God. Unlike naturalism or pantheism, the Bible doesn't reduce us down to either just our material, physical nature or to just our spiritual nature. Christianity recognizes the real complexity of humanity as it is found in our physical, emotional and spiritual components.

Are We Good, Bad, or Neither?

To a naturalist, this notion of good and evil can only apply to the question of survival. If something promotes survival, it is good; if not, it is evil. The only real question is how

malleable human behavior is. B. F. Skinner, a Harvard psychology professor, believed that humans are completely programmable via classical conditioning methods. A newborn baby can be conditioned to become a doctor, lawyer, or serial killer depending on its environment.{11}

The movie that won "Best Picture" in 1970 was a response to Skinner's theories. *A Clockwork Orange* depicted a brutal criminal being subjected to a conditioning program that would create a violent physical reaction to just the thought of doing harm to another person. Here is dialogue between the prison warden and an Anglican clergyman after a demonstration of the therapy's effectiveness.

> Clergyman: *"Choice! The boy has no real choice! Has he? Self interest! The fear of physical pain drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement! Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice."*
>
> Warden: *"Padre, these are subtleties! We're not concerned with motives for the higher ethics. We are concerned only with cutting down crime! (Crowd Applause) And with relieving the ghastly congestion in our prisons! He will be your true Christian. Ready to turn the other cheek! Ready to be crucified rather than crucify! Sick to the very heart at the thought even of killing a fly! Reclamation! Joy before the angels of God! The point is that it works!"*{12}

Stanley Kubrick denounced this shallow view of human nature with this film, yet Skinner's behaviorism actually allows for more human flexibility than does the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson, another Harvard professor. Wilson argues that human emotions and ethics, in a general sense, have been programmed to a "substantial degree" by our evolutionary experience.{13} In other words, human beings are hard coded to respond to conditions by their evolutionary history. Good and evil seem to be beside the point.

Jean-Paul Sartre, another naturalist, rejected the limited view of the sociobiologist, believing that humans, if anything, are choosing machines. We are completely free to decide who we shall be, whether a drunk in the gutter or a ruler of nations. However, our choice is meaningless. Being a drunk is no better or worse than being a ruler. Since there is no ultimate meaning to the universe, there can be no moral value ascribed to a given set of behaviors.{14}

Pantheists also have a difficult time with this notion of good and evil. Dr. Brugh Joy has written,

> In the totality of Beingness there is no absolute anything—no rights or wrongs, no higher or lower aspects—only the infinite interaction of forces, subtle and gross, that have meaning only in relationship to one another.(15)

The Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh wrote,

> I am totally passive. Whatsoever happens, happens. I never question why, because there is no one to be asked.{16}

Christianity teaches that the universe was created by a personal, moral Creator God, and that it was created good. This includes humanity. But now creation is in a fallen state due to rebellion against God. This means that humans are inclined to sin, and indeed are born in a state of sinfulness. This explains both mankind's potential goodness and internal sense of justice, as well as its inclination towards evil.

What Happens at Death?

Bertrand Russell wrote over seventy books on everything from geometry to marriage. Historian Paul Johnson says of Russell that no intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell. Holding to naturalist assumptions caused an obvious tension in Russell regarding human nature. He wrote that people are "tiny lumps

of impure carbon and water dividing their time between labor to postpone their normal dissolution and frantic struggle to hasten it for others."{17} Yet Russell also wrote shortly before his death, "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."{18} One has to ask why he would pity these self-centered lumps of impure carbon and water?

Most people over forty begin to question the nature and consequence of death. Some become obsessed with it. A recent movie called *Flatliners* focused on what death might hold for us. It involved a number of young doctors willing to die temporarily, to find out what was on the other side.

> Young Doctor #1: *"Wait a minute! Wait! Quite simply, why are you doing this?"*
>
> Young Doctor #2: *"Quite simply to see if there is anything out there beyond death. Philosophy failed! Religion failed! Now it's up to the physical sciences. I think mankind deserves to know!"* {19}

Philosophy has failed, religion has failed, now its science's turn to find the answers. But what can naturalism offer us? Whether we accept the sociobiology of Wilson or the existentialism of Sartre, death means extinction. If nothing exists beyond the natural, material universe, our death is final and complete.

Pantheists, on the other hand, find death to be a minor inconvenience on the road to nirvana. Reincarnation happens to all living things, either towards nirvana or further from it depending on the Karma one accrues in the current life. Although Karma may include ethical components, it focuses on one's realization of his oneness with the universe as expressed in his actions and thoughts. Depending on the particular view held, attaining nirvana is likened to a drop

of water being placed in an ocean. All identity is lost; only a radical oneness exists.

Christianity denies the possibility of reincarnation and rejects naturalism's material-only universe. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment…" It has always held to a linear view of history, allowing for each person to live a single life, experience death, and then be judged by God. Revelation 20:11-12 records John's vision of the final judgment.

> "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."

All three versions of what happens at death may be wrong, but they certainly can't all be right! We believe that based on the historical evidence for Christ's life and the dealings of God with the nation of Israel, the Biblical account is trustworthy. We believe that those who have placed their faith in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross will spend eternity in glorified bodies worshiping and fellowshiping with their Creator God.

Evaluation & Summary

In his autobiography, entomologist E. O. Wilson writes that as a young man he accepted Christ as his savior, but because of what he perceived to be hypocrisy in the pulpit he walked away from the church shortly after being baptized. Later at Harvard University he sat through a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. and then a series of gospel songs sung by students from the campus. He writes that he silently wept while the songs were being sung and said to himself, "These are my

people."{20} Wilson claims to be a naturalist, arguing that God doesn't exist, yet he has feelings that he can't explain and desires that do not fit his sociobiological paradigm. Even the staunchly atheistic Jean-Paul Sartre, on his death bed, had doubts about the existence of God and human significance. Naturalism is a hard worldview to live by.

In 1991 Dr. L. D. Rue addressed the American Association for The Advancement of Science and he advocated that we deceive ourselves with "A Noble Lie." A lie that deceives us, tricks us, compels us beyond self-interest, beyond ego, beyond family, nation, [and] race. "It is a lie, because it tells us that the universe is infused with value (which is a great fiction), because it makes a claim to universal truth (when there is none), and because it tells us not to live for self-interest (which is evidently false). `But without such lies, we cannot live.'"{21} This is the predicament of modern man; either he lives honestly without hope of significance, or he creates a lie that gives a veneer of meaning. As William Lane Craig writes in his book *Reasonable Faith,*

> Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.{22}

The pantheist is little better off. Although pantheism claims a spiritual reality, it does so by denying our personhood. We become just another impersonal force field in an unending field of forces. Life is neither going anywhere nor is there hope that evil will be judged. Everything just is, let it be.

Neither system can speak out against the injustices of the world because neither see humankind as significant. Justice implies moral laws, and a lawgiver, something that both systems deny exist. One cannot have justice without moral

truth. Of the three systems, only Judeo-Christian thought provides the foundation for combating the oppression of other humans.

In J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, Packer argues that humans beings were created to function spiritually as well as physically. Just as we need food, water, exercise, and rest for our bodies to thrive, we need to experience worship, praise, and godly obedience to live spiritually. The result of ignoring these needs will be the de-humanizing of the soul, the development of a brutish rather than saintly demeanor. Our culture is experiencing this brutishness, this destruction of the soul, on a massive scale. Only revival, which brings about personal devotion to Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, will reverse this trend. Since we are truly made in God's image, we will find peace and fulfillment only when we are rightly related to Him.

Notes

1. Stephen Moore, "The growth of government in America," *The Freeman*, April (1993), 124.
2. Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 1992), 174.
3. William Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 50.
4. *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (Carolco Pictures Inc., 1991).
5. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Paramount Pictures, 1980).
6. John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50.
7. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 3.
8. Brugh W. Joy, *Joy's Way* (Los Angeles: J.B. Tarcher, Inc., 1979), 4.
9. Gerald G. Jampolsky, *Teach Only Love* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 52.
10. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate* (Philadelphia: Harper Colophon, 1977), 5.

11. Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105.
12. *A Clockwork Orange* (Warner Bros. Inc., 1971).
13. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, p. 6.
14. Robert D. Cumming, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Random House, 1965), 363.
15. Joy, *Joy's Way*, p. 7.
16. Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate*, p. 5.
17. Israel Shenker, "The Provocative Progress of a Pilgrim Polymath," *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 123.
18. Ibid.
19. *Flatliners* (Columbia Pictures, 1990).
20. Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), 46.
21. William L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 71.
22. Ibid., p. 70.

© 1996 Probe Ministries International

Truth or Tolerance?

There are terrible implications if truth is relative instead of absolute. Tolerance has become the ultimate virtue, especially on university campuses. Scott Scruggs provides a Christian response to this alarming trend.

If I were to ask you what our culture deemed more valuable, truth or tolerance, what would you say? To emphasize the purpose for the question, consider the following three illustrations.

Case 1. Recently, I had a conversation with a young man about Christianity. He listened closely to what I had to say about

how Jesus Christ had saved me from my sin, but immediately became very defensive when I tried to suggest that he too had that same need for Christ as his Savior. He explained to me that because we live in a pluralistic society, all religions are equally valid roads to God. "You're just being too closed-minded," he said. "Jesus works for you, just like Buddha works for someone else. So if you want people to respect what you have to say, you need to be more tolerant of beliefs unlike your own."

Case 2. Last year, a dean at Stanford University began to pressure evangelical Christian groups on campus to stop the practice of "proselytizing other students." Ironically, what angered the dean was not the content of the message that was being shared, but the practice of sharing itself. He believes that in approaching someone with the Gospel, you are implying that the person's beliefs are inferior to your own. Such an implication is unacceptable because it is self-righteous, biased, and intolerant.

Case 3. Graduate student Jerome Pinn checked into his dormitory at the University of Michigan to discover that the walls of his new room were covered with posters of nude men and that his new roommate was an active homosexual who expected to have partners in the room. Pinn approached the Michigan housing office requesting that he be transferred to another room. Listen to Pinn's own description of what followed: "They were outraged by this [request]. They asked me what was wrong with me—what *my* problem was. I said that I had a religious and moral objection to homosexual conduct. They were surprised; they couldn't believe it. Finally, they assigned me to another room, but they warned me that if I told anyone of the reason, I would face university charges of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation."{1} In their mind, Jerome had no right to a new room because he was being intolerant.

Notice that in each of these scenarios, Christians are not

accused of “false teaching,” but of “false practice.” The young man, the dean, and the housing officials never challenged the *truth* of these moral claims, but the *legitimacy* of making such claims in the first place.{2} Similar situations occur every day in schools, universities, the media, the marketplace, and the halls of government. Consequently, Christians are being silenced, not by superior ideas, but by our culture’s impeachment of moral absolutes and inauguration of moral openness.

So what are Christians to do? Are we not called to be confident carriers of the truth of the Gospel? Then how do we voice our belief that Jesus is the *only way* without being intolerant of someone who thinks differently? This is one of the most difficult dilemmas facing Christians today. In this essay we will examine the nature of the tolerance revolution in our culture, expose its strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly, establish a Christian response to the question of truth or tolerance.

Tolerance Under a Microscope

On two different occasions, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, sponsored a campaign to encourage its community to speak out against the excessive amount of violence and sexual promiscuity on television, in the movies, etc. To bolster this drive, they distributed bumper stickers that read, “Speak Up For Decency.” Within days of the arrival of these stickers, another bumper sticker appeared that looked practically identical to the first one, except it read, “Speak Up For Liberty.” The seriousness of this reaction was nailed home when I came to a stop light and counted over ten “Speak Up For Liberty” stickers on the back of the van in front of me; it was as if the driver was protecting freedom from fascism.

After considering the message on each sticker, I found myself at an impasse. On one hand, I agree that there is too much

indecency on television, yet on the other hand, I believe that liberty is our nation's most prized resource. Yet after more consideration, I came to the conclusion that this was not a debate over freedom, but a discrepancy over the interpretation of tolerance.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *tolerance* as "the capacity for or practice of recognizing and respecting the options, practices, or behavior of others." First, tolerance demands recognition, which is a legal imperative. Naturally, the Constitution recognizes and protects the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Second, it calls for respect, which is a social imperative. The Declaration of Independence declares that we are all created equal, indicating that we need to respect all men, even when there are differences of opinion.

However, in our culture, tolerance is not being discussed as a legal or social imperative, but a moral one. In response to a survey concerning beliefs about God, a sixteen-year-old girl replied, "In my mind, the only people who are wrong are the people who will not accept different beliefs as being, well, acceptable."{3} This girl believed that the only real sin is to not accept or *tolerate* other people's beliefs. Likewise, openness or "uncritical tolerance" has become our society's moral standard. Consequently, people who seem intolerant are wrong.

But is tolerance a moral virtue? By definition, the function of tolerance is relegated to the legal and social arena in order to *protect* moral issues, not *enforce* them. As a result, talking about tolerance as a moral virtue is a circular argument. Listen to the following statement: "It is morally wrong to say that something is morally wrong." Is that statement not self-defeating?

In addition, any moral standard necessitates intolerance of anything which violates that standard. Merely using the phrase

“a moral standard of tolerance” is a contradiction in terms. In S. D. Gaede’s words, “If you are intolerant of someone who is intolerant, then you have necessarily violated your own principle. But if you tolerate those who are intolerant, you keep your principle, but sacrifice your responsibility to the principle.”{4} Consequently, a person who is wholly committed to tolerance, must resort to total apathy. Yet putting over ten bumper stickers on a car is hardly apathetic and thus anything but tolerant.

The notion that tolerance is a virtue is a paradox. Nevertheless, it has become the dominant moral guideline for our culture.

What If Truth Is Relative?

Believe it or not, our world is waging a war against truth. Allen Bloom writes, “Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth . . . is the greatest insight of our time.”{5} The philosophical basis for the uncritical tolerance that is so prevalent in our society is the replacement of truth with relativism.

According to the *Barna Report*, 66% of the entire population believe “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Another poll estimated that 72% of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five also reject the notion of absolutes.{6} So what do the majority of Americans believe? Well, without absolutes, they are left with moral relativism: the notion that all values are legitimate, and that it is impossible to judge between them. Truth is reduced to personal preference; what’s true is what works for you.

The assumption that truth is relative has infiltrated almost every facet of our society: the marketplace, the arts, government, education, family, and even religion. According to a poll, 88% of evangelical Christians claim that the “Bible is

the written word of God and is totally accurate in all it teaches," and yet 53% also believe there are no absolutes.{7} Ironic? Not when one considers how powerful and pervasive this philosophical trend really is. Allen Bloom summarizes the logic behind the assumption that truth is relative:

> The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.{8}

Bloom is saying that instead of searching for mankind's past faults, the world has condemned our ability to claim to be right at all.

But is the viewpoint that truth is undefinable a plausible philosophical position? Is not the claim, "there are no absolute truths" intrinsically self-contradictory? Gene Edward Veith notices that "[t]hose who argue that 'there is no truth' are putting forth that statement as true."{9}

So to make this claim, there must be at least one truth that is universal. And if there is one universal truth, then the premise that there are no absolutes is false.

Another problem was illustrated by R. C. Sproul. He recalled the Senate hearings over Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination and the opposing testimonies of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Sproul admitted that he didn't know who was telling the truth. However, what he knew with absolute certainty was that "they both couldn't be telling the truth." In the same way, Christianity claims exclusively that salvation is an unearnable gift from God, whereas Islam claims exclusively that a man must earn his salvation. It is possible that both are not true, but it is impossible for *both* to be true.

Moral relativism is hard-wired into our culture. But let's reclaim the superiority of truth—God's truth—as the solution for the sickness of our culture, a sickness that tolerance and moral relativism cannot cure.

Tolerance and Chapped Lips

I would bet that you are familiar with the dry, burning sensation of chapped lips. With this in mind, what is the almost instinctual reaction when you feel your lips drying out? You lick them, right? For a moment they feel better, but then what happens? They get even drier, don't they? In fact, the more you lick, the worse they get. This is an example of mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution. If moist lips are the desirable end, shouldn't we lick them to make them well again? Of course not, even if it feels right at first. As most people know, the appropriate cure for chapped lips is not licking, it's lip balm.

Well, the same is true in life. We live in a world burdened by injustice, discrimination, and inequality; they are the "chapped lips" of our culture. Many people insist that the best solution is a greater degree of tolerance. In some ways this answer sounds right. But is tolerance the lip balm for our culture or are we just licking our lips? Are we just mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution?

To answer this question, I want to glance at a couple of what I call "tolerance trends." The first is political correctness. S. D. Gaede notes that the goal of political correctness "is to enforce a universal standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background, or sexual orientation."{10} Thus, the Golden Rule for a politically correct person is to not do, say, or even imply anything that any other individual or group might find offensive.

A second tolerance trend is multiculturalism. Whereas political correctness is more legalistic, the goal of

multiculturalism is greater inclusiveness. Schools and universities are not just teaching history from the traditional “dead white male” perspective, but including the experiences of African-Americans, Native Americans, women, and other groups who have been marginalized. Businesses are supporting this movement as well. “Multicultural workshops” are being created to help workers get along in a more culturally diverse business environment.{11}

On one hand, there is much to be praised about these movements. Christians have more reason than anyone to abhor discrimination and prejudice. God hates injustice and loves to liberate the oppressed, and so should we. Therefore, a Christian perspective should transcend cultural, racial, or class distinctions.

At the same time, these tolerance trends are merely impulsive reactions to the problem and not well-thought-out solutions. The reason is simple. If our goal is just more tolerance, then discrimination isn’t wrong in a moral sense, it’s only offensive. Yet what constitutes “being offensive”changes according to the whims of the ethnic and social group involved. Consequently, a standard of tolerance becomes arbitrary and variable because it is subject to interpretation based on an underlying bias. Ultimately, no matter how legitimate it sounds, how right it feels, or how rigorously it is enforced, tolerance alone can never eliminate prejudice any more than licking can cure chapped lips.

Justice and equality will become realities not by superficially incorporating tolerance, but by embracing absolute truth—a transcendental truth that includes the foundation for both moral law and human value—an unwavering truth which at times may even demand intolerance. It is a truth that only a God who is a righteous Judge and a loving Creator can establish.

Restoring Credibility and Confidence in the Christian Solution

To this point we have examined the short-comings of tolerance and the superiority of truth. But understanding the situation is only half the battle. As Christians, we are called to action. So how do we reach a world that is choking on its own tolerance?

First, we must remind ourselves of the authority and power of God's truth. In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us to "put on the full armor of God" as our defense against the enemy. In verse 14, Paul reminds Christians that first and foremost we are to "stand firm . . . having girded your [our] loins with truth." In a culture that is bearing down on Christians, we must remain steadfast and resist evil. We do so by preparing ourselves for the fight, by girding ourselves with the truth. It is the foundation for everything else. In the words of the late Ray Stedman,

> Truth is reality, the way things really are. Therefore it is the explanation of all things. You know you have found the truth when you find something which is wide enough and deep enough and high enough to encompass all things. That is what Jesus Christ does.

The writer of Hebrews wrote that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and yes, forever." The truth of Christ is much more encompassing than anything this world has to offer.

Second, if you are walking in truth, you will discover that there is a time for both tolerance and intolerance. For example, Jesus associated with the sick, the poor, and the dejected. He shared meals with prostitutes, tax collectors, and criminals. Christ doesn't judge us by our skin color or social status, but by the condition of our hearts.

Unfortunately, Christians have a long way to go in matching

His standard. All too often, we are hampered by racial differences and social barriers. Perhaps it's time that we began to raise our voice against injustice and not leave it up to the ebbing multiculturalist movement.

Yet as accepting as Jesus was, He was extremely rigid about the exclusiveness of His claims. Of all the choices in life, He tells us there is only one way, one truth, and one life—His. How much more exclusive, even intolerant, can you get? Christians need to remember that loving another person may sometimes mean being respectfully but firmly intolerant of what is not true.

Earlier I told of a conversation I had with a peer about Christianity. After I realized we had actually been disagreeing regarding our assumptions about truth, I started over. I asked him why tolerance was an issue of morality. He thought for a moment. Then I asked him how truth could possibly be relative, and we began questioning his own assumptions about morality. Finally, I shared C. S. Lewis's notion that any moral law, including his claims regarding tolerance, implies the existence of a Moral Law Giver. And by the end of the conversation, he was beginning to consider the possibility of God and his own accountability to Him.

This young man was not ready for a spiritual tract about the Gospel, but he was eager to hear about truth. And there are people everywhere—people you know—who are just like him. Without hearing a verse from Scripture, this man moved one step closer to his Creator. Why? Because, as Paul writes, "truth is in Jesus." That means that sharing truth is sharing Christ, no matter what form or fashion it takes.

Notes

1. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*(New York: The Free Press, 1991}, 8-9.

2. S. D. Gaede, *When Tolerance is No Virtue* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993}, 12.

3. Lynn Minton, "Fresh Voices," *Parade Magazine*, 11 June 1995, 10.

4. Gaede, 23.

5. Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987}, 26.

6. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway Books, 1994}, 16.

7. Ibid., 16.

8. Bloom, 26.

9. Veith, 59.

10. Gaede, 21.

11. Ibid., 36.

© 1996 Probe Ministries

Politically Correct Ethics

Liberal Idealism's Approach to Ethics

Ben and Jerry's ice cream is renown for being the ice cream for those who want to be friendly to the environment. Ben and Jerry's Homemade Inc. built a national reputation by (1) claiming to use only all natural ingredients and (2) sending a percentage of the profits to charities. The company's Rainforest Crunch ice cream supposedly uses only nuts and

berries from the rain forests.

But there is a lot more to ethical behavior than a laid-back, socially correct agenda. An audit of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. revealed the use of sulfur dioxide preservatives and use of margarine instead of butter in some of the flavors. Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. also served on the editorial board of Anita Roddick's Body Shop, another company expounding the use of natural products. It took an article in *Business Ethics* to expose Body Shop's false advertising claims and other ethical failures. Synthetic colorings, fragrances, and preservatives were being used in Body Shop products.{1}

Today we live in a world engrossed in the ideas flowing from a socially correct agenda, and it is overshadowing the time proven priority of basic business ethics. It is an agenda centered in tolerance and environmentalism. (Interestingly, those on the environmental side are not very tolerant of those who do not hold to their rigid perspective, such as their stand on not using animals in product testing.)

Levi Strauss is another interesting case in point. The company has a strong politically correct mindset, and diversity and empowerment are central for their organizational ethics. They have demonstrated a strong concern for human rights, yet they are clearly on the liberal side of family values. They have been boycotted by the American Family Association for their support of homosexuality providing benefits for the "domestic partners" of their employees.

Although this socially correct movement expounds the idea of tolerance for all, proponents tend to be very intolerant of anyone who may support a position they do not agree with. Kinko's Copies found this out the hard way when they advertised on the Rush Limbaugh show. A boycott was quickly threatened until Kinko's promised not to advertise on Rush's show again.

There is great danger in using political views to measure business ethics because social goals can become equated with business ethics. This is not right. Business ethics is concerned with the fair treatment of others such as customers, employees, suppliers, stockholders, and franchisees. Truth in labeling and advertising is paramount in establishing a business enterprise and is even more important than the issues of animal testing and commitment to the rain forest, as important as they may be.{2}

This approach to ethics comes from liberal idealism. We see this perspective in Robert Bellah's book, *The Good Society.* Liberal idealism seeks to transform society by social engineering. The liberal idealist looks for ways of managing a modern economy or developing broad social policiesthat will meet the needs of society as a whole. This system believes in the innate goodness of mankind, the worldview of enlightenment thinking, that men and women are fully capable of reasoning what is good and right, i.e., the autonomy of human reason. There is no felt need for revelation or any authority beyond themselves. Liberal idealism is marked by a lot of faith in government and the ability of organizational programs to orchestrate a healthy society.

We will be contrasting this line of thought with a more bottom up view that emphasizes personal integrity and greater concern for individual moral convictions.

Bottom up Ethics

But there is another more traditional way of looking at ethics. It is an individual model, rather than an organizational one. It demonstrates a greater concern for the moral conviction of individuals. This view emphasizes that institutions don't make ethical decisions, people do. It stresses that virtue comes from the individuals who make up the many small groups and larger institutions, from families to voluntary associations to multinational corporations. The

goal is to convert the individual in order to change the institution. Answers are sought more through education and/or religion to reach the individual in the belief that transformed individuals will transform their institutions.

A corporation that has established an ethics department with an approach more along the lines of the individual model is Texas Instruments. Their theme is “Know What’s RightDo What’s Right.” Their emphasis is on training individuals within the corporation to know the principles involved in each unique ethical dilemma that may present itself and motivating the individuals involved to make good ethical decisions. The company maintains various avenues of support to assist individuals within the corporation in making difficult decisions. Carl Skoogland, vice president of the Ethics Department at Texas Instruments, has said, “In any relationship an unquestionable commitment to ethics is a silent partner in all our dealings.” Their seven-point ethics test is oriented toward individual initiative:

1. Is the action legal?
2. Does it comply with our values?
3. If you do it, will you feel bad?
4. How will it look in the newspapers?
5. If you know it is wrong, don’t do it!
6. If you’re not sure, ask.
7. Keep asking until you get an answer.{3}

Although critics might say these types of simple maxims lack in specific guidance, when combined with an overall educational program they help individuals think through issues and make the right decisions themselves, multiplying the base of ethical agents within the corporation.

Traditional Western culture, which has given us the most

advanced and free lifestyle of any culture, has been based on both a Greek model of transcendent forms and a Judeo-Christian model of God- given objective standards. This tradition has taught us that we are all flawed and need a personal transformation before we can be of any true value in transforming society.

Religion and Education in Ethical Development

Earlier we mentioned Robert Bellah's book, *The Good Society,* and its support of liberal idealism, or the ability of government and organizational programs to orchestrate a healthy society through broad social agendas.

William Sims Brainbridge, in writing a review of Bellah's book, makes a statement that could well apply to so many of the modernist writings: "The book's prescription sounds like a highly diluted dose of religion, when what the patient needs might be a full dose."

This "organizational model" fails to fully appreciate the need for integration of religion and education in order to provide a united front against the materialism and self-centeredness of our present culture. As long as we allow our educational system to teach that we are evolved animals, here by chance and of no eternal significance, we can only expect short-sighted self-interest. If fundamentally all there is is matter, energy, time, and chance, why can't one believe in anything such as apartheid, or ethnic cleansing, or euthanasia, or genocide? Where is liberal idealism's source for personal integrity and convictions other than in cultural relativism? Under a theory of cultural relativism all intercultural comparisons of values are meaningless.

The need, of course, is for transcendent truths. By transcendent, we mean an ethical ideal independent of any given political system or order. This ethical ideal can then

serve as an external critique of corporate or political aspirations or activities. Is this not what Plato was referring to when he discussed his theory of universal forms, that there are ideals beyond the reality of this physical world? In this postmodern world we are now experiencing a complete rejection by many of any objective truth. In fact, anyone who still believes in the search for truth is often labeled as ethnocentric, i.e., the liberal idealism of our present age refuses to accept that someone might find a truth that has universal application.

The ethics of enlightenment thinking do not appear to be 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."{4} We appear to have an implosion of values in a society that is seeking to teach that there is no God and no afterlife, but if you live an ethical earthly life somehow it will pay off.

British historian, Lord Acton, is best remembered for his warning that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He believed that liberty was the highest political end. But, he also recognized that liberty can't be the sole end of mankind. There must also be some kind of virtue, and virtue has its roots in religion. Lord Acton's work showed that no society was truly free without religion.{5} Professionals must be educated to understand the moral worth of their actions and the roles religion and education play in promoting self-control.

Religion and Education at Odds

We have been discussing the need for both religion and education in establishing an ethical base for all our actions. But the question arises, how will we find the needed balance in an American society in which public education and traditional religions are at odds with one another over very

basic presuppositions such as the nature of the universe, humanity, ethics, culture, evil, truth, and destiny?

The liberal solution has been to remove the traditional truths and make our institutions humanistic. The conservative response has been to establish an independent educational system in which those who hold to more traditional values can integrate religious truth with educational aims. We now have two major educational tracks, the public track based on the religion of secular humanism and the private track based on the religion of biblical Christianity. The professionals involved in the educational institutions must decide how to deal with the tension between the two tracks. The need is to resolve tension and build bridges of understanding, rather than intensify the cultural war. But, as Christians, we must not compromise truth. There must be cooperation without compromise.

John Adams, our first vice-president, said, "Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."{6} Meaning is the living fabric that holds us together with all things and meaning for life will only be found through the transcendent values of religion. In his article, "The Globalization of Business Ethics: Why America Remains Distinctive," David Vogel writes, "Thanks in part to the role played by Reformed Protestantism in defining American values, America remains a highly moralistic society."{7}

At this point, in realizing the need to be fair, we must be willing to give a critical assessment of the gross behavioral failures that have occurred in the realm of the religious. The most blatant examples are probably the numerous TV evangelists who have fallen prey to greed and other temptations that have destroyed their lives and ministries. Another example is the many ministers and priests who have practiced sexually deviant behavior with children in their care. Many of these religious leaders are now or have been serving time in prison for their

personal moral failures.

These examples highlight the moral depravity of mankind. But this does not mean that we need to adopt the sixteenth century views of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) who had a very low view of human nature. Unfortunately, much of the world has been heavily influenced by the amoral perspective of a Hobbesian foundation of ethical behavior. Hobbes decided that what is good or bad is based on what society likes or dislikes. This is cultural relativism, the rejection of any standard beyond that established by the present culture. Hobbes, like so many others, seems to have had an innate fear of the possibility that there might be a transcendent truth out there worth pursuing. Because of our personal inner moral failure, we must look outside ourselves to find the standards by which we are to live and establish those standards in our laws and in our educational systems.

Does a Rising Tide Lift all Boats?

President Kennedy said, "A rising tide lifts all boats." But think about it! Does a rising tide lift all boats? Not if some of the boats have holes in them.

In this essay we have been discussing the contrast between a politically correct ethical approach to dealing with our ethical concerns against a more bottom up individual responsibility approach.

The historic roots of the American experience are bound up in the idea of individualism, a political tradition that enshrines individual liberty as its highest ideal. But democracy requires a degree of trust, and unfortunately, our heritage of trust is eroding. American businesses have been transformed from comfortable and stable rivals into bloodletting gladiators.{8} There is a problem in emphasizing individual freedom and the pursuit of individual affluence (the American dream) in a society with an economy and

government that has rejected the principles of natural law. Too many of our boats have holes in themi.e., little or no personal integrity. We must work at restoring the principles of individual integrity and personal responsibility before we try to establish an ethical agenda for our organizations. Unless we realize our own morally flawed state, we will seek to repair the institutions without the humility and personal transformation necessary to afford any hope of ultimate success. Organizational ethical behavior is very important, but it must be elevated through an upsurge of individual ethical behavior.

Those coming from a liberal idealism approach to ethics hold noble ideas of common good based on a belief in the inherent goodness of men and women. They believe that if we just change the structures of society, the problems will be solved. Their perspective is that greater citizen participation in the organizational structures of our government and economy will result in a lessening of the problems of contemporary social life. What they neglect to consider is that government attempts to make people good are inherently coercive. Our constitution rests on the premise that virtue comes from citizens themselves, acting through smaller groups, such as the family, church, community, and voluntary associations. The stronger these small, people-centered groups are, the less intrusive the government and other large organizations need to be.

But how do you deal with the need for individual transformation? A common phrase we often hear is “You can’t legislate morality.” In reality all laws are a legislation of morality. All we are doing is changing an “ought to do/ought not to do” into a “must do/must not do” by making it a law. A solid base of moral law helps to establish the standard for individual behavior, but as the New Testament so clearly tells us, the law is inadequate to the task at hand. It is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that enables us to overcome the

forces within and without that seek to destroy our God-given abundant life. Only by placing our trust in Christ can we begin to repair the holes in our life. When the internal integrity of our life is as it should be, we are then ready for the tides of life to come. A rising tide does lift all boats that have internal integrity.

Notes

1. Marianne M. Jennings, "Manager's Journal," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 1995.
2. Ibid.
3. Texas Instruments, publication TI-28172.
4. Crane Brinton, *A History of Western Morals* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 462.
5. Charles Oliver, "Leaders & Success," *Investor's Business Daily*, 14 December 1993.
6. Quoted in John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 185.
7. David Vogel, "The Globalization of Business Ethics: Why America Remains Distinctive," *California Management Review* (Fall 1992), 44.
8. Robert Reich, "Corporate Ethic: We can change behavior by altering mix of incentives," *The Dallas Morning News*, 14 January 1996, 5J.

© 1996 Probe Ministries.

Slogans – A Biblical

Worldview Response

Jerry Solomon considers many popular slogans to see how they are designed to influence our thinking. Taking a biblical, Christian worldview, he finds that many popular slogans are promoting vanity, immediate gratification, or materialism. Ends that are not consistent with an eternal Christian life view. As he points out, we do not have to let these slogans control our thinking.

Let's try an experiment. I'll list several slogans, some from the past, others from more contemporary times, but I'll leave out one word or phrase. See if you can supply the missing word or phrase. Here are some examples:
"Give me liberty or give me. . ."
"Uncle Sam wants . . ."
"I have a . . ."
"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask . . ."
"Just do . . ."
"Life is a sport; . . ."
"Gentlemen prefer . . ."
"Image is . . ."
"Coke is . . ."
"You've come a long way, . . ."
"This is not your father's . . ."
"You deserve a break . . .."

Well, how did you fare with my experiment? Unless you've been living in a cave for many years, you probably were able to complete several of these phrases. They have become a part of "The fabric of our . . ." Yes, the fabric of our lives. In most cases these slogans have been written to promote a product. They are catchy, memorable maxims that help the listener or reader associate the statement with a commodity, thus leading to increased sales. Advertisers spend millions of dollars for such slogans, an indicator of their importance.

Double Meanings

Often a slogan contains a double entendre intended to attract us on at least two levels. For example, an ad for toothpaste from several years ago asks, “Want love?” Obviously, the advertiser is playing upon a universal need. All of us want love. But the initial answer to the question is “Get . . .Close Up.” Of course a couple is pictured in close embrace with vibrant smiles and sweet breath as a result of their wise use of the product. The implication is that they are sharing love, but only as a result of using the love- giving toothpaste. Another example, again from several years in the past, states “Nothing comes between me and my Calvins.” The double meaning is obvious, especially when the slogan is coupled with the accompanying picture of a young girl. No doubt the companies that hired the ad agencies for such campaigns were very pleased. Their sales increased. The fact that I am even using these illustrations is indicative of their success in capturing the attention of the consumer.

Slogans and the Christian

But the marketplace is not the only arena where slogans are found. Christians often use them. Many contemporary churches strive to attract the surrounding population by utilizing various adjectives to describe themselves. For example, words such as “exciting,” “dynamic,” “friendly,” or “caring” are used as part of a catchy slogan designed to grab the attention of anyone who would see or hear it. And such slogans are supposed to be descriptive of how that particular church wants to be perceived. This applies especially to those congregations that are sometimes called “seeker sensitive.” The idea is that there is a market in the surrounding culture that will be attracted to the implications of the slogan. One of the foundational tenets of our ministry at Probe is that the Christian should think God’s thoughts after Him. Then, the transformed Christian should use his mind to analyze and

influence the world around him. One of the more intriguing ways we can experience what it means to have a Christian mind is by concentrating on the content of the slogans we hear and see each day. In this article we will examine certain slogans in order to discover the ideas imbedded in them. Then we will explore ways we might apply our discoveries in the culture that surrounds us.

Slogan Themes: Vanity

"Break free and feel; it reveals to the world just how wonderful you are." "Spoil yourself." "Turn it loose tonight; don't hold back." "You deserve a break today." "Indulge yourself." "Have it your way." These slogans are indicative of one of the more common emphases in our culture: vanity. The individual is supreme. Selfishness and self-indulgence too often are the primary indicators of what is most important. Such phrases, which are the result of much thought and research among advertisers, are used to play upon the perceptions of a broad base of the population. A product can be promoted successfully if it is seen as something that will satisfy the egocentric desires of the consumer.

Christopher Lasch, an insightful thinker, has entitled his analysis of American life *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch has written that the self-centered American "demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire."(1) We will return to the subject of immediate gratification later, but the emphasis of the moment is that slogans often focus on a person's vanity. The individual is encouraged to focus continually on himself, his desires, his frustrations, his goals. And the quest that is developed never leads to fulfillment. Instead, it leads to a spiraling sense of malaise because the slogans lead only to material, not spiritual ends.

One of the more famous slogans in the Bible is "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." This exclamation is found in

Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book full of application to our subject. King Solomon, the writer, has left us with an ancient but very contemporary analysis of what life is like if self-indulgence is the key. And his analysis came from personal experience. He would have been the model consumer for the slogans that began this essay today: “Break free and feel.” “Spoil yourself.” “Turn it loose.” “You deserve a break today.” “Indulge yourself.” But he learned that such slogans are lies. As Charles Swindoll has written:

> *In spite of the extent to which he went to find happiness, because he left God out of the picture, nothing satisfied. It never will. Satisfaction in life under the sun will never occur until there is a meaningful connection with the living Lord above the sun.(2)*

Solomon indulged himself physically and sexually; he experimented philosophically; he focused on wealth. None of it provided his deepest needs.

So what is Solomon’s conclusion in regard to those needs? He realizes that we are to “fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). How would the majority of this country respond if a slogan such as “Fear God and keep His commandments!” were to suddenly flood the media? It probably wouldn’t sell very well; it wouldn’t focus on our vanity.

One of the Lord’s more penetrating statements concerning vanity was focused on the man who is called the rich young ruler. Douglas Webster has written that

> *It is sad when Jesus is not enough. We are told that Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and loved him.But the love of Jesus was not enough for this man. He wanted it all: health, wealth, self- satisfaction and control. He knew no other way to see himself than the words we use to describe him a rich young ruler.(3)*

Perhaps this analysis can apply to us too often. Is Jesus enough, or must our vanity be satisfied? That's a good question for all of us.

Slogan Themes: Immediate Gratification

"Hurry!" "Time is running out!" "This is the last day!" "You can have it now! Don't wait!" These phrases are indicators of one of the more prominent themes found in slogans: instant gratification. This is especially true in regard to much contemporary advertising. The consumer is encouraged to respond immediately. Patience is not a virtue. Contemplation is not encouraged.

Not only do we have instant coffee, instant rice, instant breakfast, and a host of other instant foods, we also tend to see all of life from an instant perspective. If you have a headache, it can be cured instantly. If you need a relationship, it can be supplied instantly. If you need a new car, it can be bought instantly. If you need a god, it can be provided instantly. For example, a few evening hours spent with the offerings of television show us sitcom dilemmas solved in less than half an hour; upset stomachs are relieved in less than thirty seconds; political candidates are accepted or rejected based upon a paid political announcement. About the only unappeased person on television is the "I love you, man!" guy who can't find a beer or love.

You're a consumer. Be honest with yourself. Haven't you been enticed to respond to the encouragement of a slogan that implies immediate gratification? If you hear or see a slogan that says you must act now, your impulse may lead you to buy. At times it can be difficult to resist the temptation of the moment. The number of people in serious debt may be a testimony to the seriousness of this temptation. The instant credit card has led to instant crisis because of a thoughtless response to an instant slogan. When we hear "Act now!"or "Tomorrow is too late!" we can be persuaded if we are not

alert to the possible consequences of an unwise decision.

One of the most respected virtues is wisdom. The wise man or woman is held in high esteem. This is especially true for the Christian. The Bible tells us of the lives of many people: some wise, some unwise. The wise person is portrayed as someone who patiently weighs options, who seeks God's counsel, who makes decisions that extend far beyond instantaneous results. The unwise person is portrayed as one who acts without sufficient thought, who doesn't seek God's counsel, who makes decisions that may satisfy for the moment but not the future. So the contemporary Christian should strive to become wise in the face of the slogans that surround him. He should realize that the supposed benefits of products cannot be compared to wisdom. As Scripture states:

> *How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels; and nothing you desire compares with her (Proverbs 3:13-15, NASB).*

Let's develop our own slogan. Perhaps something like, "Wisdom now; decisions later!" would be a good antidote to the messages we hear and see so often. Also, let's implant the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, especially patience and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). And let's reinforce our thought life with the truth that things of value are not achieved instantly. That reminds me of another slogan: "Rome was not built in a day." And how Rome was built is not nearly as valuable as how our lives are built.

Slogan Themes: Materialism

In the early sixteenth century an Augustinian monk declared *Sola Fide!*, "Faith Alone!", a slogan that had been used by many before him. But Martin Luther issued this proclamation in

opposition to certain theological and ecclesiastical emphases of his time. Instead of teaching that faith could “make” one righteous, he insisted that only God can “declare” one to be righteous based upon Christ’s victory on the cross. Eventually he came to believe that the church needed reformation. And as the saying goes, “The rest is history.”

In the late twentieth century it appears that the most important slogan is *Sola carnalis*, “The flesh alone!” or “The physical alone!” Put in a contrary manner: “What you see is what you get!” Material things are usually the focus of our attention. Non material or spiritual things generally are not part of our consciousness. The impression is that life can be lived properly through the purchase of products. Or, life is to be lived as if this is the only one you’ve got; there is no heaven or hell, no sin, no sacrifice for sin, no judgment. As the old commercial says, “You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get.” And the slogan of a more recent commercial relates that “It doesn’t get any better than this!” as friends share the events of a wonderful day together in a beautiful setting while drinking just the right beer. Of course, there is a measure of truth in each of these slogans. We should live life with gusto, and we should enjoy times of companionship with friends. But from a Christian standpoint, these ideas should be coupled with a sober understanding that this life is not all there is.

Jesus often spoke directly to those who would deter Him from His mission, which required His brutal sacrifice. For example, Satan sought to tempt Jesus by focusing on material things. But the Lord rejected Satan’s enticements by focusing on things that transcend this life. And His rejections always began with a powerful, eternally meaningful slogan: “It is written,” a reference to the truth of Scripture. On another occasion, after Jesus showed “His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things,” Peter proclaimed, “This shall never happen to You.” Jesus replied that Peter was

setting his mind on man's interests, not God's. Then followed a haunting statement that has become a crucial slogan for those who would be Christ's disciples: "If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." This conversation came to a conclusion when Jesus asked two rhetorical questions: "For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:21-26)

Do those questions sound trite? Have we heard and read them so often that we don't consider their implications? If we are immersed in the concepts of today's slogans, such questions should be sobering. Referring back to our previous examples, Jesus' questions contain answers that say no, it is not true that "You only go around once." And yes, it does get better than this. We are more than physical beings destined for dirt. We are spiritual and physical beings destined for life in heaven or hell. And for the believer in Christ this life is to be lived with "the life to come" in mind.

Are We Slaves of Slogans?

"Remember the Alamo!" "No taxation without representation!" "I shall return!" "I have not yet begun to fight!" "Never give up!" These memorable slogans are the stuff of legends. They represent a level of commitment that led many to give their lives for a cause or country. Are the slogans of today any less intense? No doubt many new ones are entering the consciousness of those who have been at the center of the tragic conflicts in Bosnia, Lebanon, and other centers of violent conflict. Strife seems to create powerful slogans.

But what of the strife that is found on the battlefield of our minds? Slogans are indicative of the war that is a part of the life of the mind. (It is fascinating to note that the etymology of the word slogan stems from the Gaelic *slaugh-garim*, which was a war cry of a Scottish clan.)

No doubt I could be accused of exaggerating the impact of slogans. But let's remember that enormous amounts of money are spent to encourage us to respond to the messages they contain. For example, commercials shown during the most recent Super Bowl cost the sponsors approximately $1,000,000 per 60 second spot. Such sums surely would not be spent if there weren't a significant payoff. And it is not as if slogans were hidden in some underground culture; we are flooded with them at every turn. As one writer has put it: "Commercial messages are omnipresent, and the verbal and visual vocabulary of Madison Avenue has become our true *lingua franca*."(4) We may be at the point where we can communicate with one another more readily through the use of advertising slogans because they provide a common ground. But what is that common ground? Is it compatible with a Christian worldview? The answer to both questions in our secularized culture is usually "No!".

We have emphasized three themes that are readily found in contemporary slogans: vanity, immediate gratification, and materialism. Of course, there are many more subjects, but these serve to demonstrate that the *lingua franca*, the current common ground, is one that should be carefully weighed against the precepts of Scripture. The Christian worldview cannot accept such themes.

A disciple of Christ is challenged not only to consider the implications of slogans in the marketplace, but in the church as well. We can be swayed by the same ideas that drive those who formulate the slogans of commercialism. Douglas Webster offers these penetrating comments:

> *Public opinion has become an arbiter of truth, dictating the terms of acceptability according to the marketplace. The sovereignty of the audience makes serious, prayerful thinking about the will of God unnecessary, because opinions are formed on the basis of taste and preferences rather than careful biblical conviction and thoughtful theological reflection. Americans easily become "slaves of slogans" when*

discernment is reduced to ratings.(5)

Surely none of us would like to be described as a "slave of slogans." We want to believe that we are capable of sorting out the messages we hear so often. Yes, we are capable through the Lord's guidance. But as Webster has written, we must be sober enough to be sure that we are not being led by taste and preferences. Instead, we should implant careful biblical conviction and thoughtful theological reflection in our lives. And I hasten to add that such thinking should apply to us both individually and within our churches.

Perhaps the most fitting way to conclude our discussion of slogans is with another slogan: "To God be the glory in all things!" Such a thought, if made the center of our lives, surely will demonstrate the power of slogans.

Notes

1. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner, 1979), 23.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), 16.
3. Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, Ill: 1992), 68.
4. Rogier van Bakel, "This Space for Rent," *Wired* (June 1996), 160.
5. Webster, 29.

©1996 Probe Ministries.