Points of Contact

Making Contact

In 1988 at the Republican National Convention, George Bush called for “a thousand points of light” as a part of his campaign for president. His intention was to encourage the involvement of a small but committed number of people who could make a difference. If only a few would answer the call, a thousand points of light emanating from communities large and small would touch the country. The implications of President Bush’s phrase remind me of a phrase designed to instill the same concept in the members of a branch of our military: “The few, the proud, the Marines.”

These ideas are not far removed from a concept that should be descriptive of Christian communities. We should be “points of light” to the surrounding world, even if we are “the few.” After all, Jesus said His disciples are “…the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). (Of course He did not say we are to be “the proud,” and most of us are not Marines. But I think you get the idea.) Jesus continues with this exhortation: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). How can we shine the light of Christ in the surrounding world? I submit that one response to this question is this: We can be points of light by establishing points of contact.

You may be thinking, “Just what is meant by a point of contact?” Good question! Let me attempt to explain. For our purposes in this series a “point of contact” contains several points (pardon the pun).

1. Its purpose is to activate conversation that leads to evangelism.

2. It stimulates dialogue.

3. It enables you to make a transition from a non-Christian worldview to a Christian worldview.

4. It serves as a "bridge" to someone who might not otherwise respond to the gospel.

5. It encourages you to meet a person where "he lives" mentally and spiritually.

6. It provides a positive challenge to use your God-given creativity, instead of relying on a "canned" approach.

7. It stretches you to converse with non-believers in ways that can be understood by them. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning."{1} Christians tend to have their own "educated language." We may understand one another. But the non-Christian probably has no idea what we are saying; he is uneducated in our language.{2}

All of these points assume that you are sharing what we will call a "common life" with those around you. What are some of the elements of this common life? You probably share time and space each day with friends, business colleagues, neighbors, sports opponents, people on the train or plane, and a host of other possibilities. But these refer only to the physical portion of your common life. What about such things as the news media, television programming, movies, magazines, sporting events, and many others that are shared, paradoxically, when we may be alone? They too are part of the common life we share, whether Christian or non-Christian. Such things provide points of contact. They can be bridges to the gospel.

Pertinent Points

Have you ever traveled over the Golden Gate Bridge, or maybe the bridge over the Royal Gorge? If so, why were you on such bridges? Usually we assume they have been constructed to transport us from one side of a gap to another. There is a significant gap between you and your destination on the other side. A bridge provides at least one way to get there.

How large is the gap between Christians and non-Christians? Most Christians would reply that the gap is enormous, and in a theological sense they are correct. The Christian worldview is on one side of a chasm, and non-Christian worldviews are on the other. Such a predicament could be left as it is, which is the case for too many Christians. But part of the Christian's responsibility is to "bridge" that gap with the amazing truth of the gospel. Points of contact can provide the raw materials for the building of such a bridge.

Alister McGrath, a great theologian and apologist of our time, has suggested several such points of contact that are shared by all people. These can be useful as you begin to erect a bridge.{3} As we consider such points, use your imagination and think of ways in which you might engage someone in conversation.

First, most people have *a sense of unsatisfied longing.* We are made in the image of God. We have an inbuilt capacity—indeed, an inbuilt *need*—to relate to God. Nothing that is transitory can ever fill this need. Created things are substituted for God, and they do not satisfy.

A major portion of my life includes involvement in the musical world. I have performed a wide assortment of music styles. But in particular, I have developed a great appreciation for what most people call "classical music."

One of the more intriguing aspects of classical music history

of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a "sense of unsatisfied longing." For example, Gustav Mahler continually composed in order to come to grips with that longing. One of his close friends, the great conductor Bruno Walter, put it like this: "Fundamentally, there never was relief for him from the sorrowful struggle to fathom the meaning of human existence."{4} When I hear Mahler's music, I hear that "sorrowful struggle" and think of how I may have talked with the great composer himself.

Second, most people have a sense of *human rationality.* This resonance of reason with God is a harmony of rationality, hinting that human nature is still marked with the *imago Dei* [image of God]. Given the Christian understanding of who God is and what He is like, our knowledge of both our rational selves and the rational world ties in with belief in His rational and creative existence.

C. S. Lewis expressed this point by focusing on the probability of a mind. He wrote, "What is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know. That is to say, it is conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another. It made the universe, partly for purposes we do not know, but partly, at any rate, in order to produce creatures like itself . . . to the extent of having minds."{5}

Third, most people have a sense of *the ordering of the world.* Modern science has demonstrated that the world is ordered. But its disclosure of an intelligible and delicately balanced structure raises questions that transcend the scientific and provide an intellectual restlessness that seeks adequate explanation. Perhaps the most fundamental of these questions can be summarized in a single word: Why?

Think of the newspapers, books, and magazines you read. They consist of ordered arrangements of ink on paper. "Neither the chemistry of the ink nor the shapes of the letters determines

the meaning of the text. In short, the message transcends the properties of the medium."{6} The message requires a messenger.

Fourth, most people have a sense of *human morality.* Most humans realize the importance of moral obligation or at least they have an awareness of the need for some kind of agreement on morality.{7}

Perhaps this is noticed most easily when sensational crimes are committed, as when Charles Manson murdered Sharon Tate and her friends. Even though the public may not agree on how justice should be carried out, seldom do we hear that the crime was a good thing. Invariably there is a sense of moral outrage and a cry for justice.

Fifth, many people struggle with a sense of *existential anxiety and alienation.* This reflects a deeply rooted fear of meaninglessness and pointlessness, a sense of the utter futility of life, even sheer despair at the bewildering things that threaten to reduce us to nothing more than a statistic—ultimately a mortality statistic. While it seems trite to talk about "the meaning of life," it is a question that lingers at the edges (and sometimes squarely in the center) of reflective human existence.{8}

The twentieth century is replete with famous examples of this point. From the philosophical intricacies of people such as Jean-Paul Sartre, to the expletives of punk-rocker Johnny Rotten, many have struggled with anxiety and alienation. Even a German word, *angst,* has entered our vocabulary as a statement of such states of mind. "Man has a sense of dread (*Angst*); he is a being thrust into the world and headed for death (nothingness) with no explanation [that] 'there is something rather than nothing at all.'"{9} Contrary to the openness of those such as Sartre and Rotten, this point of contact is one of the more "quiet" ones, in that it is not openly stated. Anxiety and alienation generally are not easily

seen and heard; one has to be sensitive to what lies below the surface.

Sixth, most people have an *awareness of finitude and mortality.* The fear of death, often voiced in terms of a radical inability to cope with the brute fact of human existence, runs deep in human nature. As the writer/director/actor Woody Allen said, "I'm not frightened of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Physical death, perhaps the most universally realized truth, may be the least discussed. It is inevitable, but its mystery so often stirs terror or resignation. Listen to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

> *To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,*
> *Creeps in this petty pace from day to day*
> *To the last syllable of recorded time,*
> *And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*
> *The way to dusty death.*
> *Out, out, brief candle!*
> *Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player*
> *That struts and frets his hour upon the stage*
> *And then is heard no more: it is a tale*
> *Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*
> *Signifying nothing.{10}*

If you could talk with people like Charles Manson, Johnny Rotten, Woody Allen, or the fictional Macbeth, how would you respond? Would you consider how these points of contact could be used to engage them in conversation? Would you think carefully about how God may use you to get their attention?

Biblical Points of Contact

Mustard seeds, hidden treasure, vineyards, debtors, fig trees, sheep, money. What do such things have in common? You probably recognize such terms from the parables that Jesus used to

teach spiritual principles. We could add many more phrases, because the Gospels contain many instances when Jesus used His favorite teaching device as a point of contact with His listeners.

Just what is a parable? Literally, the word means, "to throw alongside." Parables "…were used by Jesus to teach a truth, illustrate a doctrine, or move His audience to a moral attitude or act."{11} Apparently they were used spontaneously in light of an immediate situation or conflict, and they focused on what was familiar to the audience.{12} These characteristics are indicative of how Jesus was able to get the kind of attention that opened doors to important truths. When we attempt to find a point of contact, we are following Jesus' example. We may not use a parable, but we are responding to an immediate situation spontaneously in a way that is familiar to our audience.

So a parable is one device found in the Bible that can be used as a point of contact. When we read the Gospels they are hard to miss. But Jesus used other devices as well.

One example of this is found in the story of His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Both Jesus and the woman initially were at the well for water, but Jesus quickly engaged her in conversation concerning something beyond physical water. His point of contact was the water, but He quickly used that as a "springboard" that drew her focused attention. He said, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water" (John 4:10). Imagine if you had heard such a response! Don't you think your interest would have been piqued? This encounter provides an example very different from a parable. Let's call it a "curiosity contact." That is, Jesus raised the woman's curiosity about whom He was and what He had to say. Her life was forever changed as a result.

At this point you may be thinking, “Yes, I see what Jesus did through points of contact. But obviously, I’m not Jesus. I can’t do what He did.” To a point, you are correct. You certainly are not Jesus, but you can follow His example. The book of Acts contains instances of this. Let’s consider two of those.

The eighth chapter of Acts includes Philip’s famous dialogue with an Ethiopian eunuch. The Holy Spirit had led Philip to the eunuch, but it appears that Philip creatively and spontaneously addressed the man. He saw that he was reading, so he asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). What a wonderful point of contact! Philip then was given an opportunity to direct their conversation towards the gospel. Such an encounter reminds me of a question most of us have asked: “What are you reading?” In addition to asking that question, today we may ask, “What are you watching?”

Paul’s defense of the faith at Mars Hill in Athens provides another illustration of selecting a point of contact. The city was filled with thousands of idols. Paul had noticed one such idol that was inscribed, “to an unknown god” (Acts 17:23). An idol became his point of contact! Thus he began to proclaim the truth in response to their admitted ignorance.

What are some of the points of contact in your daily life?

Contemporary Contacts

You are taking a walk around your neighborhood. As you turn a corner a few blocks from your house, you see an old friend whom you have not seen in a couple of years. She is riding a bicycle in your direction. As she gets closer she recognizes you and stops. The two of you strike up a conversation that revolves around the kinds of things that usually are discussed on such occasions: Have you seen Sally lately? Did you hear about Jim’s divorce? How are your children? Then you realize that God’s Spirit is encouraging you to guide the conversation

toward Christ. You are thinking of a way to do this when you suddenly notice that she is wearing an especially beautiful necklace with a cross. You comment on her jewelry, then you ask, “What does the cross represent?” She responds by saying it’s just a nice piece of jewelry that was given to her by her daughter. But it has no “religious significance.” You respond to her statement by sharing the true meaning and significance of the cross.

This fictitious story demonstrates how a point of contact can lead to an opportunity to share the gospel. In order to bring this discussion to a conclusion, we will give attention to six ways points of contact can give you an open door for God’s truth.

First, be attentive to your God-given imagination. Of all people, Christians should creatively interact with the world around them for the glory of God. This may mean you will need to practice the habit of “sharpening your focus” on the world around you. Maybe you can begin to see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

Second, be attentive to the things most people have in common. A piece of jewelry was the common element in the illustration that was used to begin this program. Jewelry is something most people have in common. But whether it’s jewelry, clothes, houses, cars, children, sports, or a long list of other things, you can find a point of contact among them.

Third, be attentive to those things that are most important to the person with whom you are sharing. For example, most people think of their immediate family as the most important part of their lives. Points of contact abound when you are sensitive to what is most important in a person’s life.

Fourth, be attentive to the subjects that occupy someone’s conversations. If the person with whom you are conversing talks a great deal about movies, find a point of contact

there. If another person is fanatical about sports, find a point of contact there. If a hobby is the center of conversation, find a point of contact there. Such a list virtually is endless.

Fifth, be attentive to areas of greatest immediate need. Some people may dwell on their poor health. Others may concentrate on failures in their lives. Or maybe you will find yourself in conversation with someone who is bitter about something that happened in the past. Again, such a list of possibilities virtually is endless. All of them supply points of contact.

Sixth, and most important, be attentive to what the Spirit of God is telling you. He is not silent; He will bring appropriate things to your attention. Any point of contact will only be effective as the Spirit guides you to respond.

The world around us is starving for contact. People need to hear what God has to say through us. He will guide us to make contact for His glory. We are God's messengers of hope. I hope we get the point.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 98.

2. See my article Christian Cliches.

3. Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993),30-47.

4. Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler* (New York: Vienna House, 1941), 129.

5. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952),

31-32. Quoted in McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God*, 35.

6. Stephen C. Meyer, "The Explanatory Power of Design: DNA and the Origin of Information." In *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design*, ed. William A. Dembski (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 135.

7. I recommend that you read the opening portion of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943) for a brilliant exposition of this point. Actually, you should read the entire book; you will benefit from it. It has become a classic.

8. See my article The Meaning of Life.

9. Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 48.

10. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V. In *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Vol. 2, W. G. Clark and W. Aldis Wright, eds. (Garden City: Nelson Doubleday, n.d.), 813.

11. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 302.

12. Ibid.

Listening

Listening: A Lost Art?

“Listen to me!”
“Don’t you ever listen?”
“Listen up!”
“Are you listening?”
“Listen carefully to what I have to say.”
“Listen and learn.”

Do such phrases sound familiar to you? Maybe you have heard them from your parents, a teacher, a preacher, or maybe you use them with your children or other family members. They are commands or questions that emphasize the importance of listening. We all want to be heard; we believe what we have to say is significant. It is disheartening and humiliating when we are ignored.

Many years ago I witnessed a scene that has been written indelibly in my memory. It was not an event of earth-shaking importance. It was a simple exchange of time and attention between two people. One of those people was a very prominent, world-renowned pastor of one of the largest churches in the world. The other person was a church member who simply was seeking to spend a few minutes in conversation with the pastor. I don’t know what the member wanted to discuss; it didn’t seem to matter to the pastor. The thing that made their conversation so memorable was that many people just like the one with whom he was talking surrounded the pastor. They all wanted a few minutes of his time and attention. But instead of

being distracted by many different voices, the pastor gave his full attention to one person at a time. He focused his eyes on each individual and appeared to have a genuine interest in each of them. This scene has proven to be a model for me. I have thought of it many times as I have attempted to give my attention to anyone who seeks to be heard.

On the other hand, we have seen and experienced the opposite of this scene. Too often we are oblivious to the importance of listening. Either the one to whom we are speaking is not listening, or we are not concentrating enough on what someone else has to say to us. Have we lost the art of listening? If so, it is important that we consider how meaningful it can be to be good listeners. Within a Christian worldview, this is an essential art.

The words *listen* or *hear* and their cognates are used in the New American Standard Bible over 1,500 times. Obviously this implies that the terms are important for one who takes the Bible seriously. If we are to build a worldview that honors God, we should learn to listen.

To whom or what should we listen? Surely many answers to this question could be suggested. The art of listening is worthy of thorough discussion. But, in this discussion, I will concentrate on four facets of listening. First, we should listen to God. Second, we should listen in order to understand. Third, we should listen to the world around us. And fourth, we should listen to the non- Christian. Each of these will be offered with the hope that the development of good listening skills will lead to good communication of God’s truth. If we are listening carefully, we will in turn have a hearing among those who need the message we can share.

Listening to God

What would your parents, or children, or family, or friends, or coworkers say if they were asked if you listen to them? In

most cases, we would like to think that such people deserve to be heard. But if you are a Christian, God should be added to such a list. Surely a Christian wants to listen to God above all others.

A Christian worldview includes the belief that God is a supernatural but personal being who communicates with us. His transcendent character does not mean that He is bound to be isolated from those He loves. That love includes the fact that He has infinite wisdom to share with His loved ones. And the wise person is one who is worthy of that description because he has learned to listen to God's wisdom.

In addition, the Christian worldview includes the glorious truth that God listens to us. As a book title states, *He is The God Who Hears.*{1} The creator and sustainer of the universe actually chooses to hear us. The Bible is clear about this. "Idols are deaf (Deut 4:28; Rev 9:20), but God is personified as having ears (1 Sam 8:21) and hearing his people (2 Sam 22:7)."{2}

Such thoughts are part of a common thread among most Christians. But those of us who have been taught the central tenets of biblical content may tend to be too comfortable with such concepts. We may have ignored the startling nature of communication with God. It can be helpful for us to realize that these beliefs are distinguishing marks of both biblical Judaism and Christianity. "Unlike ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing. Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible."{3} From the central proclamation of Judaism, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut. 6:4), to the familiar declaration of the Lord Jesus, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15), the Bible affirms the importance of listening to the God of the Bible.

At this point we should stop and consider at least one segment

of what is entailed in listening to God. That is, we are to listen to God through His Word, the Bible. “Just as human beings address God by means of language through prayer, God addresses human beings by means of language in the pages of Scripture.”{4} Before we succumb to the temptation of letting such truths pass by us, consider the dynamic implication of God addressing us in the pages of Scripture. The apostle Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13:

> *Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.*

Obviously Paul believed that what He wrote was from God through the Holy Spirit. Paul was listening to God in such a way that “we might know the things freely given to us by God.” Thus, when the Christian reads or hears the Bible, he is listening to God.

Listening In Order to Understand

Have you ever had a frustrating conversation? That’s a ridiculous question, right? You can probably bring many such conversations to mind! You just were not able to “get through” to the person, or the opposite was true. Maybe one of the two of you was listening, but you just did not understand one another.

As Christians, such frustration may be the result of not cultivating the art of listening. This begins with listening to God. If we have learned to hear God through His Word, we have come to realize important elements of listening in order to understand. If we can listen to God, we are able to listen to our fellow men.

First, we realize that understanding is often the result of

focus. Whether we are studying the Bible, praying, hearing a sermon, listening to family or friends, viewing a movie, or a list of other things, our attention needs to be focused. Admittedly, this can be difficult to achieve. Distractions seem to flood our lives at the most inopportune times. But how often are such distractions a result of unnecessary additions to our lives? Have we put rugged mountains in our paths? Do we find ourselves struggling to climb those mountains before we can focus on what we truly are seeking on the other side? Perhaps we are in need of a refocusing on what is truly important, along with the discarding of what is not truly important. When this happens we will begin to walk a path that will provide more opportunities to listen in order to understand. I believe our relationships with God and those we love will deepen as a result.

The second element of understanding is patient contemplation. Some may call this meditation, which is a thoroughly biblical practice when we are meditating on Scripture. But whether we are contemplating Scripture, or what our children may have just said, our objective is to understand. Again, this also can be difficult to achieve. Because of the ways in which pop culture has permeated our lives, we have grown accustomed to immediate gratification.{5} This isn't surprising in light of the fact that most of what fills our ears and eyes doesn't require much, if any, patient contemplation. In fact, the things we tend to hear and see would be considered failures if we didn't respond immediately. Such pressures are indicative of the struggles of Christians in the world. According to Scripture, this will be true until Jesus returns. As a result, the Christian community is in need of those who are willing to do the hard work of patient contemplation. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

The third element of listening in order to understand concerns the application of what is heard. When we have listened carefully enough to focus and contemplate we then are ready to

use what has been heard. This is a crucial element of a Christian worldview, because in the New Testament ". . . the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith (Matt. 8:10; 9:2; 17:20 etc.) and action (Matt. 7:16, 24, 26; Rom. 2:13 etc.)."{6} As Jesus said, ". . . everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock" (Matt. 7:24). Let's aspire to be considered among the wise. God will be glorified because He will have something to say through us.

Listening to the World Around Us

You are sitting in your doctor's office waiting to see him about a persistent cough you have had for more than two weeks. As you are thumbing through a magazine you are suddenly startled by an advertisement that proclaims, in very large letters: "YOU ARE THE C.E.O. OF YOUR LIFE!" Then you begin to read the fine print at the bottom of the ad, which states: "Think about it. Your life is like a business. It makes sense that you're the one in charge." You are thinking about it, and you do not agree. Why? Because you have been "listening" to the world around you and you realize that your world view does not fit with what you consider to be a brazen claim. You are not the C.E.O. of your life; God is. Your mental and spiritual sensitivity meter is working properly.

This fictitious scenario illustrates one of the common ways our Christian worldview guides us as we "listen" to the world around us. Many ideas are being shared in that world and many of them are contrary to Christian thought. Stephen Eyre refers to those ideas as "dragons." He believes these are cultural values that ". . . are particularly strong and absolutely deadly for the church."{7} Eyre identifies six of them.

The first dragon is *Materialism.* Matter is all that matters; "I am what I own." Jesus said, ". . . do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink;

nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25)

The second dragon is *Activism.* Life is to be filled with action; "I am what I do," or "I am what I produce." God said, "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46:10).

The third dragon is *Individualism.* We can depend on no one but ourselves; "I am self-sufficient." The apostle Peter wrote these memorable words to people, not just an individual: ". . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession . . ." (1 Pet. 2:9).

The fourth dragon is *Conformism.* Recognition by others is a necessity; "I am who others recognize me to be." Jesus warned His disciples: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1).

The fifth dragon is *Relativism.* It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something; "I am whatever I choose to believe." Jesus declared that what we believe about Him is what ultimately matters when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

The sixth dragon is *Secularism.* Religion is all right in its place; "I am sufficient without God." Jesus said we are not sufficient unless we have Him: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Are we listening to the dragons, or to the Word of God? May the Lord guide us as we listen to the world around us with His ears.

Listening to the Non-Christian

My ministry experiences include the privilege of travelling to the beautiful country of Slovenia. While in this formerly communist state I was invited to speak to older high school students in their classes. (Yes, they spoke and understood English very well.) After one of these classes I engaged in conversation with several young people who were especially curious about the issues I had raised about the subject of worldviews. As I listened closely to what they were saying I realized they might have been using certain terms without much knowledge of what they mean. One of those terms was the word atheist. Some of them claimed they were atheists. So I gently asked if they understood the implications of the word by using an illustration that got their attention. Then I asked if they knew of the word agnostic. After they indicated they had not heard of the word I explained it to them. Immediately they responded by asserting that the word agnostic described them more accurately than atheist. From that point in our conversation I was able to share the gospel, the answer to their agnosticism.

As you can imagine, that incident is a joyous memory in my life. But what if I had not listened carefully, not only to what the students were saying, but what they did not say? I believe that if I had not focused my attention in order to contemplate their comments and questions, I would not have had their attention as I did.

When we are listening carefully to the non-Christian we are winning an opportunity to be heard by him. There are times when evangelism can be a matter of listening, and then telling. Here are two suggestions that can help in developing the art of listening to the non-Christian.

First, listen for what the person presupposes is true. For example, the actor Brad Pitt is quoted as saying, “I have a hard time with morals. All I know is what feels right. What’s

more important to me is being honest about who you are."{8} If you were listening to him say these things you may have wanted to encourage him to consider the implications of his statements. How would he react if someone "felt like" stealing his car or robbing his house? You also could ask him if Charles Manson was being honest about himself when he committed murder. Brad Pitt's presuppositions about morality cannot be sustained. He needs something greater than his feelings and a vague sense of honesty.

Second, listen for what is not said. You may hear a lot of assertions, but what are the crucial elements you do not hear? Imagine you are listening to a non-Christian friend as he has a tirade about the hypocrisy of the Christians he knows (you excepted, of course). It suddenly occurs to you to ask what is behind his anger. He then becomes increasingly agitated as he tells you someone in a church rejected him and defamed his family when he was younger. Now you can begin to build up what had been torn down in your friend's life, even though a lot of patience may be required.

People need to be heard. May God grant us the wisdom to listen. In the process may He grant us the privilege of carrying His wondrous message to those who will hear.

Notes

1. W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986).

2. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, gen. eds., "Ear, Hearing," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

3. Ibid.

4. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 18.

5. See my essays on the subjects of Television and Slogans.

6. Gerhard Kittel, akouw, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 220.

7. Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), 14. Much of the material in this section comes from this book.

8. Brad Pitt, quoted in *Ladies Home Journal* (March 1999), 46.

Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of Christianity Ringing True Today

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a

seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."{1}

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.{2} Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure.{3} He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a

convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full- fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.{4}

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means "thoughts" in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.{5}

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were "May God never abandon me!"{6}

The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal's apologetics, it's important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn't interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God's image;

wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

> What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him."{8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

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relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.{9}

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion,

he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. “The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable,” he says, “that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances.” Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.{10}

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn’t it? But the attitude people take is this:
Just as I doRick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me.{11}

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man’s reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some,

however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."{12} Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.{13} The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.{14}

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions.{15} "The two so-called principles of truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions."{16} Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty{17}, often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our

imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."{18} In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is "the `intuitive' mind" rather than "the `geometrical' (calculating, reasoning) mind."{19} For example, we know when we aren't dreaming. But we can't prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.{20} Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. "If natural things are beyond [reason]," Pascal said, "what are we to say about supernatural things?"{21}

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?{22} Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are

also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15{23}, Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself ("hides" in the sense that He doesn't speak}. One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, "God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will." God wants to "humble [our] pride."{24}

But God doesn't remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. "If there were no obscurity," Pascal says, "man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure."{25}

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. "God is a hidden God," says Pascal, " and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him*."{26} Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

> All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God's existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.{27}

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the

judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn't do any good. As Pascal says, "That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty." A person with this knowledge has not "made much progress toward his salvation."{28} What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."{29}

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."{30} "By faith we know he exists," he says.{31} "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."{32} Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."{33}

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's

thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."{34}

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.{35} He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."{36} He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

> Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [*sic*] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the *types* of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity

within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . ." People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn't the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, "it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe," he says, " is the cross." At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: "Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."{43}

The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

> Let us then examine the point and say: "Either God exists, or he does not." But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.{44}

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it's true, while the losses will be insignificant if it's false.{45} If it's true and you have rejected it, you've lost everything. However, if it's false but you have believed it, at least you've led a good life and you haven't lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it's better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You're going to live one way or the other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can't remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?"{46} After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."{47}

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he

believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.{48} By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of

Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, Blaise Pascal (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.
6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. Ibid., 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 236.
15. Houston, 58.

16. Ibid., 58.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.
28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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.

Is Being Touched by an Angel Enough?

Don Closson evaluates what's good about TV's "Touched by an Angel" and identifies areas where it lacks substance from a biblical perspective.

Society's Interest in Spirituality

During a recent television ratings week, a relatively new program, "Touched by an Angel" ranked third with a 16.6 Neilsen rating. That means more than 16 million households were tuned in to watch three angels communicate God's love and offer of eternal life to people in various difficult, real life situations. Also, *TV Guide* magazine has featured a special report called "God and Television" which includes an

article by Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography* and quotes popular writers James Redfield, author of *The Celestine Prophecy*, Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Jack Canfield, coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and others.(1) One might conclude that TV has suddenly found God, and to a degree, that conclusion is right.

TV producers are finding out that typical TV watchers are hungry for programming that includes spiritual themes. In *TV Guide*'s own survey, they discovered in a national telephone poll that 56% of adults feel that religion does not get enough attention on prime- time TV; only 8% feel that it gets too much. Of those responding 61% desired more references to God, church attendance, and other religious observances; 68% were eager to see more spirituality as long as it was not tied to organized religion, and 82% wanted more emphasis on moral issues. One of the most successful programs at attracting these viewers has been "Touched by an Angel."

Although it had a rough beginning and was almost canceled, the program has made a miraculous recovery subsequent to hiring a professing Christian as executive producer and changing the focus of the program to more mature topics. The stories center around the activities of three angels played by Della Reese, Roma Downey, and John Dye. In the words of the *TV Guide* article, "Never has prime-time network entertainment presented God in such an unabashed and earnest fashion."(2) Recent programs have dealt with death in a sophisticated manner, relating how the angels help humans come to grip with both our mortality and the existence of a loving God. Significant topics such as the nature of God, works, eternal destiny, and faith itself have entered into the dialogue. In the words of executive producer Martha Williamson, "our show is God's truth," which is that, "God exists. God loves us. God wants to be part of our lives," and, Della Reese adds, ". . . he has a plan."(3)

Recently, the three actors and their producer were on the

Oprah Winfrey show where they remarked about the popularity of the "Touched by an Angel" program. The actors have received thousands of letters relating how the program has changed viewers' lives by making a spiritual reality more plausible and by focusing on the love of God. The actors are very proud of how they are portraying God. In the words of John Dye, who plays the angel of death, "If we're doing it poorly, I just don't think God would bless the show and allow it to continue."(4)

Are we experiencing a cease-fire in the culture war? Is the Christian right winning the battle for the media? Some might argue that only the most cynical observer could find something wrong with programs that promote a loving, personal God who wants a relationship with us and is concerned about our salvation. But, now let's consider what is good and not so good about programs like "Touched by an Angel."

Audience Response

This development new TV programs that are using God-talk during prime-time hours and getting good ratings for it is a new phenomenon. "Promised Land," "Seventh Heaven," and especially "Touched by an Angel" are boldly going where no producer would have previously gone in the spiritual realm. With four new shows about angels, spirits, and ministers lined up for the next season, it might be suggested that TV is changing for the better. Maybe the networks are finally listening to the public's demand for programming that is more family oriented and morally uplifting.

In fact, I believe that they are. And although not perfect, the new programs are providing a positive service to the viewing community. Let me explain why. Christians have been decrying for years what Richard John Neuhaus called the "naked public square" in a book by the same name.(5) We have lamented the fact that public institutions such as government, education, and the media, rarely leave room for a spiritual

reality. Naturalism, as a worldview, has had a monopoly. Christianity, if referred to, was ridiculed and parodied—what I like to call the "Frank Burns" form of Christianity. Frank Burns, the character from "M.A.S.H.," was hypocritical, emotionally weak, and possibly dangerous when given any real authority.

Current programming like "Touched by an Angel" offers a competing worldview to naturalism. It lends plausibility to the notion that there is a loving, personal God. Although the angels seem to struggle somewhat with their own understanding of God's will, they are performing, in a general sense, the most prominent role of angels in Scripture, that of being a messenger from God.

The audience also gets a reasonable picture of what life might be like if a spiritual reality is taken seriously. Contrary to the prevailing naturalistic hopelessness that pervades much of our culture, "Touched by an Angel" does offer hope via a relationship with the Creator of the universe. Characters in the episodes are encouraged to seek God and to have a relationship with Him. And importantly, they are told that they will not earn salvation by following a set of rules. People in the show are generally treated as complex individuals with weaknesses and strengths, and they respond to life's tragedies in a fairly realistic manner. All of this contributes to a positive influence that the other networks should be encouraged to emulate. As Christians we are quick to condemn, but slow to admit when something positive occurs. This type of programming, which in many ways reminds me of how God would have been expressed or talked about on TV in the late 50s or early 60s, is a bright spot amid new shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" or "Pacific Palisades."

But while the program does promote belief in God and the legitimate place that faith should play in one's daily affairs, it falls short in a number of significant ways from being all that Christians would like to see in a bold

presentation of biblical truth. Its most glaring omission is the “J” word, as in Jesus Christ. Also, God is seen as loving and caring, but little is said about His other attributes such as being holy and righteous. “Touched by an Angel” might be a useful springboard from which to present the biblical plan of salvation, but its message is too shallow to be depended upon to evangelize the viewing public on its own.

Let’s turn now to take a closer look at the ways in which “Touched by an Angel” might be a handicap to saving faith for its many fans.

The Nature of God and the Nature of Man

In our look at the return of God to prime-time TV programming, particularly the “Touched by an Angel” show, we have thus far considered the positive aspects of the show; now we will focus on how it might be improved.

Granting that “Touched by an Angel” points to a personal God, encourages a personal relationship with that God, and even teaches that our good works are not enough to establish that relationship, it still falls short of teaching a specifically Christian message because of one glaring omission. It never offers a means for that personal relationship. In theological terms, the program never tells us how we are to be found righteous before a holy God. The Bible teaches a concept known as justification which explains how God, being perfectly holy can declare us righteous enough to enter His presence. The angels on TV assume that God will accept us on our own merit, that simply turning to Him will bridge whatever separation exists. This lack of clarity could be the result of a number of reasons. The writers may feel that there is no need for justification either because God isn’t Holy or humankind isn’t sinful or fallen in the biblical sense. Both of these ideas are popular today. While people may accept the biblical teaching that God is love, they often ignore the equally important truth that God is just and holy. Most portrayals of

human nature identify lack of education as the source of our problems, not a sinful nature.

If God is loving, but not righteous, then the Apostle Paul is in great error when he says in Romans 2:5 that ". . . because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." And concerning human nature he adds that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). This great chasm between man and God is an organic part of the Christian gospel and is missing in much of TV's current focus on spirituality.

On what basis can people have fellowship with a holy God? If you argue that God is merely a projection of human attributes, He is neither holy nor a real spiritual being. If all of us are God, as New Age pantheists often teach, all we need to do is realize our godness via meditation. However, since Jesus walked on the earth, He has been the hope of many in their quest to close the gap between man and God. But again, there have been many different ideas about what Jesus' life accomplished. Some see His life as an example to be copied. Others accept Paul's teaching in Romans 3 that Jesus provides a righteousness from God, apart from living according to the Jewish law, through his death on the cross. But again, there is confusion about who Jesus is. Mormons teach that Jesus was a pre-mortal, as we were at one time, and that everyone can become gods like He is now. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of Adam, but that Jesus was an angel who lived a sinless life in the form of humanity. They also insist that good works are necessary to please Jehovah.

These different views cannot all be true. For all the good that shows like "Touched by an Angel" might accomplish, they allow for all of the above views to be seen as equally valid. When asked in an interview which God they are representing on the show (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), Della Reese responded by

saying that they talk about a Supreme Being, not about religion. But one has to ask, Which Supreme Being? We will examine this question next.

Sin and Salvation

We turn now to determine which Supreme Being, which God is being referred to by these programs. When "Touched by an Angel" actress Della Reese argues that her program refers to a Supreme Being, not to a religion, just what does she mean? Della Reese, whose TV character Tess was chosen in a TV Guide survey as the person most parents would like for their children's Sunday school teacher, is the pastor of a metaphysical congregation on the West side of Los Angeles and participates in the "New Thought Movement." The New Thought movement describes itself as "creedless" and "celebrates individual freedom," but not freedom from acting ethically. Cult leader Barbara Marx Hubbard and author Marianne Williamson of the Course in Miracles fame recently attended a conference with Ms. Reese, the 81st annual meeting of the International New Thought Alliance.(6) All of this is mentioned not to condemn Ms. Reese or to deny her the right to support the New Thought movement, but merely to observe that she is anything but a neutral portrayer of God's nature and activities.

To claim that one can speak the truth about God, and do so from a creedless perspective is a bit disingenuous. Anyone who claims knowledge about God must also tell us how they came by this knowledge. If they reject revelation, or the Christian creed that results from the Bible, where do they receive their information from and why should we accept it? Has God spoken to them personally? Are they accepting revelation from another source? How do they know what they proclaim to know about God? They must also tell us why their approach to having a relationship with God is the right one. Even if they hold to the view that all paths lead to God, or all religious

perspectives are valid ones, we must ask why they believe this is true and why it is an appropriate way to think about God and salvation.

All that having been said, Christians can use “Touched by an Angel” as a beginning point in talking about God and salvation from a Christian perspective. But the Christian will begin with the message that humanity is fallen and in need of atonement and justification. At the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry John the Baptist said of Him “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). This brief sentence is filled with profound implications. First is the notion of sacrifice. Jesus is both the victim and priest, both the sacrificial lamb and the high priest who offers the sacrifice. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament taught the necessity of blood sacrifice as payment for sin. Christ’s sacrifice was the once-for-all payment for sin against a Holy God. Paul says that we are now justified by Jesus’ blood and that He has reconciled to Himself all things, making peace by the blood of His cross (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 2:13). Jesus’ death was an act of propitiation; in other words, it removed God’s wrath against sinful humans; it appeased His anger. It was also a substitutionary death; He died on our behalf and in doing so bore our sins on Himself.

It is these truths of Scripture that the new TV programs leave out by not mentioning the “J” word. Without Jesus in the picture, being “Touched by an Angel” leaves us as sinners before an angry God.

The Gospel and the Great Commission

Finally we will consider whether or not programs like “Touched by an Angel” can be used to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reveals in a concise way what the Christian gospel is and its significance to believers. He writes, “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I

preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." Paul is serious about what is and is not the gospel. Paul continues by teaching that the gospel is "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day." Paul then notes that Christ appeared to Peter, the Twelve disciples, five hundred believers, James, then to all the apostles, and finally to Paul himself. To Paul, belief in the atoning death of Christ and His resurrection is necessary for salvation.

What Paul claims to be the gospel of Christianity is entirely missing from today's spiritually enlightened programming. As good as programs like "Touched by an Angel" are compared to the rest of TV's weekly fare, they fall far short of giving viewers what they need to know to experience a relationship with God. The God of these programs is enigmatic, we know that He exists, but how we can experience His love and forgiveness is a bit obscure.

But we should be neither surprised nor angry about this situation. Instead, these programs offer great stepping stones to serious discussions about spirituality and the Christian gospel. Evangelism depends upon the common ground that we humans all share, including questions about God, fear of death and suffering, alienation, and other topics that are highlighted by these programs. In order to take advantage of these stepping stones, believers must get beyond the temptation to see Christianity as just another personal enrichment program or self-esteem therapy.

Fallen human beings are unable to satisfy God's judgment and wrath against sin. In this sense we are totally depraved. We are not as bad as we could be that would be absolute depravity but we are completely unable to please God via our good works. As Isaiah wrote, "All of us have become like one who is

unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6). Paul, writing to the Church at Ephesus, states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). If it were not for God's imputing, or attributing, Christ's righteousness to us when we placed our faith in His sacrificial death on the cross, we would have no hope for eternal fellowship with God regardless of how many angels we have been touched by.

Network TV should be applauded for recognizing and responding to the public's desire for programs that deal with important moral and spiritual themes. However, Christians cannot become complacent or believe that TV will now bring about the Great Commission. As always, that job is to be accomplished by spirit-filled ambassadors for Christ who teach the gospel as revealed by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Notes

1. *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, pp. 24-45.

2. "Angels & Insight," *TV Guide*, March 29-April 4, 1997, p. 43.

3. Ibid., p. 44.

4. Ibid., p. 55

5. Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

6. Larry Poland, *The Mediator* (Redlands, Calif.: Mastermedia International), vol. 12, no. 1, 1997.

Worship

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

Definitions of Worship

During a 1954 interview A.W. Tozer, a great pastor and editor of the Alliance Witness, was asked what he thought would awaken the church from its complacency. This was his response: “In my opinion, the great single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple. The holy art of worship seems to have passed away like the Shekinah glory from the tabernacle. As a result, we are left to our own devices and forced to make up the lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the attention of the church people.”(1) John MacArthur, a more contemporary preacher and writer, wrote this indictment in 1993: “In the past half decade, some of America’s largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up the Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church.”(2)

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

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

Do these definitions describe worship as you experience it with your gathered church and in your daily life? If so, you are blessed. If not, perhaps you need to evaluate the place of worship in your life. Perhaps you need to consider honestly if you have allowed yourself to become accustomed to traditions that have confused true worship. Perhaps you have approached worship with the idea it applies only on Sunday mornings. Or maybe you have never stopped to consider the importance of worship.

The History of Worship

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

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

The worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the first Christians. As Robert Webber has written, "It must be remembered that the early Christians came into worship from a different perspective from modern Christians. We accept the Old because we have been informed by the New. But they accepted the New because they had been informed by the Old."(7) The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Thus Jesus set the stage for the first acts of worship among the early believers by giving new meaning to the ancient ritual of the Passover meal. Acts 2:46 tells us that the earliest form of Christian worship was a meal—"breaking bread in their homes."(8) Believers were remembering the Last Supper just as the Jews remembered the Passover. Eventually churches became too large to accommodate these shared meals, so a single table with the elements of bread and wine became the focus. Thus "the central act of Christian worship in the history of the church has always been the Communion."(9)

By the second century worship began to look more like what most of us include in our churches. Justin Martyr, an apologist and pastor, wrote of two major parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of lessons from the Old and New Testaments, a sermon, prayers, and hymns. The liturgy of the Eucharist included a kiss of peace; offering of bread, wine, and water;

prayers and thanksgiving over the bread and wine; remembrance of Christ's death, including the narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, and a command to continue in it; an Amen, said by all the people; Communion; then the reserved portions were taken by the deacons to those who were absent.(10)

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

The Purpose of Worship

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

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

such awesome things. We were filled with wonder. In our response we were telling God the truth about Himself. We were worshiping.

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

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

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

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

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

Such experiences don’t have to be descriptive only of a few.

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

Some Contemporary Hindrances to Worship

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

The same can be said frequently of us as we consider worship in our lives. If we aren’t careful, we can hinder worship, both individually and corporately, by emphasizing things that may be good, but don’t give us a complete picture of what worship entails. There are at least three words that can describe these hindrances: pragmatism, intellectualism, and evangelism.

Pragmatism as a hindrance to worship. First, pragmatism has led many to find ways of getting what they want, instead of what they need. This means the worship “customer” is sovereign. “The idea is a basic selling principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they don’t want.”(18) Many churches are growing numerically through such strategies, but is worship taking place? It’s my conviction that the answer is “No.” People may

be coming, but numbers are not the issue. Worship is done among regenerated Christians who are concentrating on who God is, not on what we want. Paradoxically, what we truly want, communion with God, takes place when we pursue what we truly need.

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

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

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

The Content of Worship

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

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

One of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship is found in Jesus’ well-known encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:23 24). Jesus told her:

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

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

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

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

Concluding Suggestions Concerning Corporate Worship Renewal

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

First, consider how time is allotted when the church gathers for worship. As churches grow they tend to break into various

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

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

Third, consider who is the leader of worship and why. It is my conviction that the pastor should be the one who calls the body to worship and leads it by example. Much is communicated to the congregation when the primary earthly leader implores the people to give their undivided attention to the reason for their gathering. In addition, much is communicated when the pastor is involved in worship beyond just the delivery of a sermon, no matter how good it may be. Having served on a church staff for many years, I know some of the time implications of this suggestion. But I believe if the church makes worship the priority, the pastor should provide the leadership for it. Fourth, consider what has priority in worship. Quite simply, the question is whether or not God has priority. Or do other things tend to crowd the allotted time and distract from the true intention? For example, it may be good to let a visiting relative of a church member sing a solo, but has someone talked with this person in order to discuss the reason for any solos within the time of worship? Remember, worship is to be God- centered, not man-centered.

Fifth, consider the place of style versus substance in

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

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

Notes

1. A.W. Tozer, *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Zondervan, 1957), 87-88.
2. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway, 1993), xvii-xviii.
3. Everett F. Harrison, "Worship," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker, 1960), 560.
4. Ibid.
5. Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, 1986), 27.
6. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 561.
7. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 84.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 86.
10. Ibid., 80-81.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid.

14. Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993),
15. Blaise Pascal, *Fire*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13.
16. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13-14.
17. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard, 1936), 713.
18. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel,* 49.
19. Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 123.
20. Ibid., 124.

Christian Apologetics

Rick Wade's introduction to Christian apologetics, rather than delving into specific arguments for the faith, examines the need to think well and develop logic skills. It is important to be able to answer the charge of elitism that is often leveled at Christianity today, and this essay concludes with some cogent statements making a case for Christianity.

Introduction

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been called upon to explain why we believe what we believe. The apostle Paul spoke of his ministry as "the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Peter said we need to "be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you."

This activity of the church came to be known as apologetics which means "defense." But, if it is important that we defend the faith, how do we do it?

In this essay I will not provide a lot of evidences and arguments. I will rather look at some basic principles that will guide us in defending the faith. We will talk about our starting point and about the important matter of thinking logically. We'll look at the specific charge of elitism which is prevalent on college campuses today. Finally, we'll deal with the question of presenting a case for Christianity.

So, what is apologetics, anyway, and what is it supposed to do? Apologetics has been defined as "the science and art of defending the faith." It is chiefly concerned with the question of the truth of Jesus Christ. In the days of the Greeks, when someone was summoned to court to face a charge, he would present an "apology" or a defense. For Christians, this might mean answering the question, "Why do you believe that Jesus is God?" or a question more often heard today, "Why do you think Christians have the truth?"

So, apologetics is first of all defense. It has come to include more than just defense, however. Not only is the truth of our beliefs an issue, but also the beliefs others hold. A second task of apologetics is to challenge other people to defend their beliefs.

A third task of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. One might call this task "proving" Christianity (although the matter of proof must be qualified). If this seems to be too ambitious a goal, we might speak simply of persuading people of the truth of the biblical message.

In all of this our goal is to let the light of God's truth shine in all its brilliance. It is our ambition also to bring unbelievers to a recognition of the truth of Jesus Christ and to persuade them to put their faith in Him.

Apologetics is typically a response to a specific question or challenge, either stated outright or just implied. Paul

reasoned with the Jews for whom the cross was a stumbling block, “explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.” In the second century, apologists defended not only Christian beliefs but also Christians themselves against such charges as atheism and cannibalism and being threats to the state. In the Medieval era, more attention was given to the challenges of Judaism and Islam. In the era of the Enlightenment, apologists had to defend Christianity against the narrow confines of scientific rationalism. Today the challenge has shifted again, this time from attacks on specific doctrines to the question of whether Christianity has any claim to final truth at all.

Like our forebears, we must answer the challenges of our day. We must respond to our contemporaries’ questions as difficult and uncomfortable as that might be.

Thinking Well

One of my frustrations in studying apologetics has been trying to master the overwhelming number of questions and challenges, on the one hand, and supporting evidences and reasons, on the other. Although it behooves us all to master some of these, it seems to me that it is just as important to learn how to think well.

Learning to think well, or logically, is important for Christians for several reasons. It helps us put together the various pieces of our faith to form a cohesive whole. It helps us make decisions in everyday life when the Bible doesn’t speak directly to a particular issue. We must learn to deduce true beliefs or proper courses of action from what we do know from Scripture.

Good, logical thinking is especially important for an apologist. On the one hand, it can help prevent us from putting together shoddy arguments for what we believe. On the other hand, it helps us evaluate the beliefs of those who

challenge Christianity. Too often we stumble at criticisms which sound good, but which really stand on logically shaky legs. Let's consider a few examples.

Here's a basic one. How do you respond to someone who says, "There's no such thing as absolute truth"? If the individual really thinks there is no absolute truth that is, truth that stands for all people at all times, that person at best can only say "In my opinion, there's no such thing as absolute truth." To say "There's no such thing as absolute truth" is to state an absolute; the statement refutes itself.

Here's another one. You've heard people say, "All religions really teach the same thing." Oh, really? Ours teaches that Jesus is God in flesh; other religions say that He isn't. A logical principle called the law of non-contradiction says that Jesus can't both be God and not be God.

Let's try one more. Some people say, "I can't believe in Christ. Look at all the terrible things Christians have done through the centuries." How would you answer this objection? While it is true that what Christians do influences non-Christians' responses to the gospel, such actions have nothing to do with whether Christianity itself is true. If part of the gospel message was that once a person becomes a Christian that person absolutely will never sin again, the objector would have grounds for questioning the truth of the faith. But the Bible doesn't say that. We can agree that Christians shouldn't do terrible things to other people, but what people did in fourteenth-century Europe or do in twentieth-century America in the name of Jesus can't change the reality of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The person making this argument may not like what Christians have done, but this complaint has no logical force against the truth of Christ. When people present arguments against the faith, we need to discern whether what they say is both factually true and logically sound. Often the objections we hear are neither. Learning how to think logically ourselves

will enable us to spot fallacies in others' thinking. Perhaps pointing these out (in a gentle way, if possible) will cause the person to rethink his or her position. At least it will defuse the attack on our faith.

Answering The Charge of Elitism

I've been talking about the importance of logical thinking in doing apologetics. Now I'd like to apply that in considering a charge currently being made against Christians, especially on college campuses.

In a video I recently saw, a young woman said the notion that Christians have the only truth is "elitist." She was saying that since there are so many different beliefs in the world, how can any one group of people claim to have the only truth? She, and many others like her, consider such thinking arrogant.

How can we respond to this charge? First, notice the name-calling. We are charged with "elitism." The real issue is passed over in favor of a put-down. This is just another example of how ideas and issues are dealt with in our society these days. It is important, however, not to react in kind. Too often in our society the battles over issues and ideas are fought with name-calling and sloganeering. This is unbecoming to Christians and unprofitable in apologetics and evangelism. We need to deal with the ideas themselves.

Second, Christians can acknowledge that non-Christians can know truth and that other religions can include some truth. If they didn't, they would find very few adherents. They fail, though, on such fundamental issues as the identity of Jesus and the way to be reconciled to God.

Third, notice the faulty logic in the argument. What does the reality of many points of view have to do with the truth-value of any of them? This is like saying: "Some men think they

should treat their wives with the same respect they desire; some ignore their wives; others think it's okay to beat them. Who's to say only one way can be right?" The structure of the argument is the same, but it is obvious that the conclusion is wrong. A critic might understandably question our assurance that what we believe is the final truth given that there are so many people who disagree. But it is faulty logic to conclude that no beliefs can claim final truth simply because there are so many of them. Fourth, since the criticism rests upon the idea that two or more conflicting beliefs can be true, we must challenge this assumption. It can be shown to be incorrect by looking to everyday experience. If my wife says it is raining outside but my son says it isn't, do I take my umbrella or not? It can't be both raining and not raining at the same time. Likewise, if one person says Jesus is the only way to salvation and another says He isn't, no more than one of them can be correct.

Some people, of course, will challenge the notion that our knowledge of God is like knowing whether it is raining outside. God is not a part of nature; He is "wholly other."This issue is much too involved to develop here. But I believe that this thinking is fundamentally a prejudice against authoritative revelation. God has spoken, and He has given us evidence in this world to confirm what He has said.

This challenge to Christianity and many others like it are not easy to deal with. But if defending the faith means responding to the challenges of our day, we must prepare ourselves, as difficult as it may be. Otherwise, we can't expect to be heard.

The Case for Christianity Part 1

Earlier I wrote that one of the tasks of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. Now I'd like to present a few foundational considerations, and after that we'll look at how we might construct a case.

When Christians are called upon to present a case for the faith, they are, in effect, being asked to offer proof that Christianity is true. What evidences or arguments can be marshaled to establish the truth of what we believe?

What we would like to do is make a case which no person of reasonable intelligence can fail to accept. But the Bible acknowledges the reality that many people will not believe no matter how compelling the evidence. Remember the story in Luke 16 about the rich man who died and suffered torment? He begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers about what they also faced. Listen to the response. Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.” A determined will can ignore the best of evidence.

Unless we are talking about proof in the mathematical sense, we need to note that proof is person-relative; what will convince one person might not convince another. This doesn’t mean, however, that Christianity only becomes true when someone is convinced. It’s true whether anyone believes it or not.

In making a case for the faith we seek to present a sound argument which will be persuasive for a particular listener. On the one hand, this consideration frees us from the responsibility of having an argument which will convince everyone; on the other hand, it means that we must not depend upon “one-size-fits-all” arguments.

Even if we’re able to deal adequately with the challenges of a given individual, we need to also note what the real basis of our belief is. A true knowledge of God is based upon divine testimony which is accepted by faith, but which is also confirmed for us by evidences of various types. The testimony of Scripture about such matters as the work of Christ on the cross and justification by faith are things which can’t be proved; they are accepted by faith.

We must also remember the nature of our message. Christianity is not just a system of beliefs, but rather the message of the One who is truth. This is an especially pertinent point today, given the mentality of the younger generations. Today we've lost the confidence in our ability to reason through the major issues of life in a disinterested, scientific manner and come to firm conclusions. Conceptual schemes that don't touch us where we really live hold little interest anymore. We need to draw people to Jesus who is the answer to the major questions of life. Christianity is living truth, and it should be preached and defended as such.

We might only be able to convince the non-believer that Christianity is plausible or believable. But that's a good start; often it takes many steps for a person to come to faith. Our job is to provide a solid intellectual foundation to make those steps sure.

The Case for Christianity Part 2

Now we'll finish our discussion by outlining a way of presenting a case for Christianity. Note that this is just an outline; it'll be up to you to fill in the details.

Since God created the universe and is active in His creation, there is no lack of evidence for the truth of Christianity. When I use the word "evidence," I'm using it in a broad way to include not only factual evidence, but logical arguments and human experience as well. Evidence is anything that can be brought to bear on the truth-claims of Scripture.

As we present evidence, we must be aware that the false presuppositions unbelievers hold about God, man, and the world might skew their evaluation of the evidences. In fact, the idea of encouraging people to evaluate Christianity makes some people uneasy. Are we allowing sinful people to bring God to the bar of judgment? No, we aren't. We are simply recognizing that, although the Bible never hints that anyone is justified

in rejecting its message, it does present witnesses to the truth, typically through historical reminders and miracles. Further, because unbelievers are made in God's image and live in God's world, they have some understanding of the truth, and we can appeal to that understanding.

We can divide the kinds of evidence at our disposal into three categories: fact (or empirical evidence); reason (or logical thinking); and experience (or human nature and the experience of life).

These three kinds of evidence can be used two ways: evaluation and explanation.

First, we can look for evidence in a given area which confirms Scripture. This is the evaluation aspect of apologetics. So, for example, we can ask, Are there observable facts which affirm what Scripture teaches? Consider history and archeology. Are the teachings of Scripture coherent and logically consistent? Yes, they are. Typically, people who say there are contradictions in the Bible have a hard time remembering one. Is what the Bible says about human nature and human experience true to what we know? Yes it is; we can identify with biblical characters.

The second way we use evidences is to see if Christianity can explain them. The following questions might clarify what I mean. We can ask, Does the Christian worldview explain the facts of nature? Yes, it does, for it says that Jesus created and sustains the universe. Does Christianity provide an explanation for the reliability of human reason itself? Sure; we are created in the image of God with intelligence. Does the Bible explain human nature and experience? Yes, for it relates that, while the image of God and common grace enable us to do good to a certain extent, we are given to sin because of the Fall.

In this essay I've tried to provide some foundational

principles for defending the faith. As we prepare to give an answer to our society, it's important that we learn to think logically, that we respond to the questions of our day, that we become familiar with the broad range of evidence at our disposal, and that we consider the person or persons we are addressing as we present our case. With this in mind, we exhibit the truth of Jesus Christ in all its splendor, and, as always, leave the results to God.

The Religion of Baha'i – What Does a Baha'i Believe

Lou Whitworth looks at the principles and claim of the Baha'i faith from a biblical perspective. Then, he compares the beliefs of Baha'i with the teaching of Christianity so we can understand the significant differences between the two. He shows that Baha'i really offers nothing to our lives while Christianity offers an eternal relationship with our Creator God.

The Origin of Baha'i

The roots of the Baha'i faith go back to a nineteenth-century religion called "Babism." Babism, which broke off from the Shiite form of Islam, was founded in 1844 in Persia (now known as Iran). The founder, a young businessman who assumed the title "Bab" (which means "the Gate" or door to spiritual truth), began to proclaim a new religious system that took a marked departure from his Islamic roots. For example, he stated that the religious prophets were divine "manifestations" of God himself. He then proclaimed himself a

prophet or manifestation of God greater than Muhammad, and claimed that he was sent by God “to replace Muhammad’s religion and laws with his own.”(1) He also saw himself as a “forerunner” to an even greater manifestation destined to emerge later. This person would be “the World Teacher who would appear to unite mankind and usher in a new era of peace.”(2)

The Bab’s message fell on responsive ears, and soon he developed a strong following. In fact, the growth of this movement, called the Babis, so alarmed orthodox Muslim leaders that the Bab was arrested. The bulk of his ministry occurred during this six-year prison sentence. The years between 1848 and 1850 were marked by bloody clashes between the Babis and the Persian government. In 1850 the government, in an attempt to eradicate the movement, executed the Bab by firing squad and launched a widespread persecution of his followers. The persecution reached its height in 1852 when the government massacred approximately 20,000 Babis. In spite of this horrible persecution, Babism continued to spread.

Before his death, the Bab had chosen a young disciple to be his successor. The young man, Subh-I-Ezel, was not cut out for leadership and many of his responsibilities were performed by his older half-brother, Mirza Husayn Ali.(3) In 1863, the older half- brother, also a disciple of the Bab, declared himself the World Teacher. In other words, he claimed to be the fulfillment of the Bab’s prediction of a coming World Teacher who would unite the world and bring peace. He then assumed the name “Baha’u’llah” which means “the glory of God.”

Most of the Babis accepted Baha’u’llah as the World Teacher (and became “Baha’is”). Some, however, remained loyal to the younger brother. Violent skirmishes occurred between the two factions, and the two leaders accused each other of attempted poisoning.(4) The government sent Subh-I-Ezel, the younger brother, to prison in Cyprus, and the older to prison at Akka (now in Israel).(5) The younger man’s following withered away,

but Baha'u'llah's following grew in numbers and intensity. This is largely because his disciples, the Baha'is, recorded everything he said over one hundred books and tablets in all, and thus were able to keep spreading the word.(6)

Baha'u'llah spent many years in prison and/or exile, but because of all the recorded teachings his movement continued to grow. He lived to the ripe old age of 75 and died in 1892. His oldest son Abdu'l- Baha was given sole authority to interpret his teachings. He was considered to be infallible in his interpretation of Baha'u'llah's works, and he proved quite successful in spreading the faith outside of the Muslim world.(7)

Major Beliefs in Baha'i

Progressive Revelation Baha'i theology holds to the idea of progressive revelation. In their system there are different manifestations of God during different periods of time. For example, in the Baha'i religion, Abraham was a manifestation of God, but he was followed by Krishna, who was followed by Moses, then by Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab, and finally by Baha'u'llah. Each manifestation allegedly builds on the previous ones and brings new information and insight to man. Thus God's message to man is progressively revealed and enhanced over time through different prophets. Though each manifestation is considered legitimate and appropriate for its time, in some sense the latter always overrules the former. Baha'is teach that Baha'u'llah is the manifestation to humanity for this time. In accordance with this principle, one of the leading Baha'i teachers said that, "The fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Baha'i belief [is] the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final."(8)

Oneness and Unity The Baha'i faith teaches the oneness of God, the oneness of all religions, and the oneness of mankind. The

emphasis on oneness is not window dressing; it is a core concept of the system. Unity is sought, taught, and preached today and is the goal for tomorrow. The mission of Baha'i life is to bring to fruition the unity of all mankind in a divine civilization based on the teachings of Baha'u'llah.

Laws and Obligations Every Baha'i should observe the following laws or obligations:

1. Pray every day.
2. Observe the Baha'i Fast from sunrise to sunset each day from March 2 through 21.
3. Consider work as worship.
4. Teach the Cause of God.
5. Avoid alcoholic drinks and drugs.
6. Observe Baha'i marriage.
7. Obey the government and not participate in politics.
8. Avoid backbiting and gossip.
9. Observe Baha'i Holy Days.
10. Contribute to the Baha'i Fund.(9)

The Twelve Principles Baha'i philosophy can be summed up in this statement: "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens." Behind this maxim are the twelve principles of Baha'i thought:(10)

1. Oneness of God.
2. Oneness of Religion.
3. Oneness of Mankind.
4. Elimination of prejudice of all kinds.
5. Individual search after truth.
6. Universal auxiliary language.
7. Equality of men and women.

8. Universal education.
9. Harmony of science and religion.
10. Elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty.
11. World government.
12. Protection of cultural diversity.(11)

Extravagant Claims Baha'u'llah made some claims about himself that are breathtaking in their boldness. "He claimed to be the fulfillment not only of all Christian prophecies, but of many Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Muslim prophecies as well. In glory, stature and importance, Baha'u'llah eclipsed Jesus and all other Manifestations. He denied being Almighty God Himself, but taught that he, like all other manifestations, was the only source of divine guidance in his cycle."(12)

Dawning of Peace Baha'is believe that "Mankind is currently headed toward a socio- economic cataclysm. Out of this tragedy a golden age' will dawn, and Baha'is will be the only ones prepared to rule in this *new world order*. [Emphasis added.] War shall cease,' said Baha'u'llah,and all men shall live as brothers.'"(13)

Contrasts Between Baha'i and Christianity

God and the Trinity In response to the Christian doctrine of one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Baha'i faith answers a resounding negative. The Baha'i's emphasis on unity (oneness of mankind, oneness of religion, etc.) is true here too. The concept of the Trinity is inconsistent and repugnant to their theology. They attribute the Christian belief in this doctrine to misinterpretation of the Bible. They view God as one person in much the same way as Judaism and Islam.

Jesus Christ To followers of Baha'i, Jesus is one of the great

prophets. His manifestation of God superseded the manifestation of Buddha which had superseded the manifestations of Zoroaster, Moses, Krishna, and Abraham, respectively. But then Jesus and His message was superseded; first by Muhammad, then by The Bab, and finally by Baha'u'llah. The idea of Jesus as the unique Son of God, both God and man, is rejected in Baha'i. To them, Jesus is just one of nine manifestations, each of which came to bring more spiritual light to the world. What each one taught was true for his time until he was superseded by a greater manifestation.

The Holy Spirit For Christians the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Triune Godhead, the revealer of truth, who inspired the Scriptures, and empowers believers for Christian service and evangelism. He is also involved in the work of convicting, regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, and sealing believers. Baha'is believe that Christ's promise of another Comforter refers not to the coming of the Holy Spirit, but to the coming of Baha'u'llah (John 14:16).

The Resurrection of Christ In Christianity the central fact is the Resurrection of Christ. Baha'is, however, do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, though they do believe in a future resurrection of all human beings. They do believe that Jesus conquered death spiritually.

Atonement for Sin The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ's death on the cross paid the penalty for sin for all who will believe on (or place their trust in) Christ. Christ bore on His body the penalty of our sin. Forgiveness is a free gift to those who believe; good works are an evidence of the inner faith. In Baha'i, on the other hand, one arrives at what we would call "salvation" by practicing the "principles laid down by Baha'u'llah and by making every effort through prayer and personal sacrifice to live in accord with the character of the divine being."(14) Even then Baha'is must hope for God's mercy without which "no one would escape the divine judgment."(15)

Heaven and Hell The Bible teaches that there will be a final judgment, that heaven will be the future reward of those who have trusted Christ, and that hell will the future home of those who have rejected Christ. Baha'i teaches that there will be a resurrection and a time of divine judgment. There is also an abode of the righteous, the paradise of God, but there is no concept of eternal flames or hell as taught in the Bible. Those who do not attain to the paradise apparently have the opportunity to progress spiritually until they are worthy of acceptance.

Baha'i's Organization and Goals

The Organizational Structure of Baha'i

Local Worship Centers In cities large enough to have at least nine adult members of the Baha'i faith, a "Spiritual Assembly" can be formed to hold official meetings and worship services. Worship services (usually held in homes) normally consist of singing and reading from the works of Baha'u'llah or Abdul Baha. In many countries the Baha'is build a National House of Worship. America has one in Wilmette, Illinois.

The Baha'i World Headquarters is located in Haifa, Israel, on the side of Mt. Carmel. A major building and landscaping program has resulted in a beautiful headquarters for the organization. It serves as a working headquarters as well as a tourist attraction and a very brilliant public relations center in which to expose the religion in a beautiful setting and win friends for the faith. One of those beautiful buildings is the Universal House of Justice, from which the whole ministry is run by an elected nine-person committee elected to five-year terms. Notable among the other buildings are the International Archives and the International Baha'i Library. All this construction on Mt. Carmel seems less strange when you remember that Baha'is believe that this site is to be the center of a coming one-world government and that one day presidents and kings from around the world will come

to this site in search of world peace. Also these structures are effective in attracting new members.

The Goals of the Baha'i Religion

World Unity Some who have studied Baha'i closely are concerned by its organizational structure and its goals of world unity. For example, how is this unity to be achieved? Also, what would happen to those who refused to conform? Some of the statements from its leaders about expecting people to give up personal and national rights are unsettling, to put it mildly. A modern religious movement with global aspirations, but very small in size is not intimidating to anyone. But, let that organization grow and set in place various institutions with power to police and enforce its vision, and the picture changes dramatically. At that point, the possibility for abuse of dissidents is dramatically increased. For this reason, Baha'i bears close watching. Some have commented that the goals of political and religious unity and of universal submission to the Baha'i leadership sound similar to the oppressive false world church system that will exist in the Last Days. (For more information, see the Book of Revelation.)

One World "When Baha'is talk about the unity of mankind, or about one world, the Kingdom of God, they do not mean a mere mood or ethos of togetherness. They mean an international political empire of which the Baha'i Faith would be the state religion."(16) In fact, Baha'is intend to institute "a Baha'i world Super-State, a commonwealth in which all the peoples of the world would be subject to a single global authority. All nations would waive their national sovereignty and cede key rights to the Baha'i world Super-state."(17)

After the historian Arnold Toynbee examined the Baha'i faith, he came to believe that it could be the future world religion. Others have expressed similar thoughts. Though Baha'i seems small and innocuous at present, if it grows in size and influence to the point that it could succeed in its aims of

unifying the world under its own terms, it could be a sinister force.

Weaknesses in the Religion of Baha'i

An Impersonal and Unknowable God In Baha'i, God is impersonal and unknowable. In Christianity, God is the believer's Father. Jesus spoke of God using a familiar, intimate term, "Abba," which means, "Daddy." The Muslim and the Baha'i know nothing of this intimacy.

No Assurance of Salvation In Baha'i, it is impossible to know whether or not you are spared from judgment and will go to the Paradise of God. Christians can know that we are forgiven and going to heaven (1 John 5:11 13). This knowledge is based not on our merit but on the mercy of God to all who will trust Christ as their sin-bearer. Apart from biblical Christianity which focuses on Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in payment for our sins, no religion, no philosophy, no program on earth has really dealt with man's sin problem. To the Baha'i, the Christian believer's claim of assurance of salvation is presumptuous. But this is a typical reaction of all non-Christian religions and cults because they all teach a program of works with no assurance of salvation.

Is the Baha'i God fickle and changeable?—Why are many "manifestations of God" necessary? According to the Bible, God never changes (He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Heb. 13:8), and human nature doesn't change or evolve. The Baha'i faith, however, holds that the manifestations were given because of different needs in different times of human history. It also teaches that after enough time has passed mankind has learned sufficiently from one cycle and needs to grow and be stretched by a new "manifestation of God."

Was Baha'u'llah an opportunist or a manifestation of God? How is it believable that the manifestation of Baha'u'llah followed that of the Bab by less than twenty years? Could

mankind have grown, progressed, and mastered his teachings so rapidly? Hardly. For one thing, few outside of Middle East had even heard of the Bab and his new religion. Furthermore, the Bab himself had predicted that the next manifestations after him would be many years (1,511 and 2,001 years) in the future.(18) Note that he mentioned two manifestations. No wonder many of the Babis were surprised and rejected Baha'u'llah's claim.

There are many facts that we could cover, but this information in this essay is sufficient to show the open-minded person that the religion of Baha'i has some real credibility problems. There are, however, many noble-minded, sweet people in this cult who deserve to hear the truth in love and gentleness so they can be free from the grip of this false religion.

In a chapter on Baha'i from his book *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Walter Martin summarized in sad and melancholy fashion the emptiness of the Baha'i faith:

> *There was no virgin born Son, there was only a Persian student; there was no miraculous ministry, there was only the loneliness of exile; there was no power over demons, there were only demons of Islam; there was no redeeming Saviour, there was only a dying old man; there was no risen Saviour, there was only Abdul Baha; there was no Holy Spirit, there was only the memory of the prophet; there was no ascended High Priest, there was only the works of the flesh; and there was no coming King, there was only the promise of a new era.(19)*

Notes

1. John Boykin, "The Baha'i Faith," in Ronald Enroth, et al., *A Guide to Cults and New Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.:InterVarsity, 1983), 26.

2. Edmond C. Gruss, "Baha'i," *Cults and the Occult* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1974, 3d ed.,

rev. and enl., 1994), 146-47.

3. Boykin, 26.

4. Ibid., 27.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Boykin, 28.

9. Official Baha'i booklet, "The Baha'i Faith" (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981).

10. Larson, 147.

11. "The Baha'i Faith."

12. Boykin, 29.

13. Larson, 147, emphasis mine.

14. Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, 1965), 256.

15. John Boykin, 30.

16. Ibid., 30 31.

17. Ibid., 31.

18. William Miller, citied in Gruss, 148.

19. Martin, 257.

The Boston Church – An Abusive Church

Former Probe staffer Russ Wise shows that the Boston Church Movement has all the marks of a dangerous, controlling cult. It departed from its roots to become legalistic and abusive.

Church Background and History

The International Church of Christ, also known as "The Boston Church," began in Gainesville, Florida, under the leadership of Chuck Lucas in 1971. It was known then as the Crossroads Church of Christ, and Lucas was the pastor. Chuck Lucas was also involved in "Campus Advance," an outreach program at the University of Florida in Gainesville. It was there that he met Kip McKean who later became the founding evangelist and prime influence of the movement. Lucas trained McKean in discipleship based on Robert E. Coleman's book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism.*

In 1976 McKean and other young men under Pastor Lucas's influence were sent to other Churches of Christ with close proximity to university campuses to establish similar ministries. Kip was sent to Heritage Chapel Church of Christ and Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. His success brought scrutiny to his method of discipleship and many in the church questioned his use of manipulation and control to reach new disciples. McKean's aggressive form of discipleship is both the source of the movement's growth and its source of controversy.

In 1979 McKean was moved to the Boston area and the Lexington Church of Christ. It was in Boston that his methodology of subtle manipulation and mind control took its effect on great

numbers of people. The church literally exploded in membership from 30 to over 1,000 members.

In 1983 the church changed its name to the "Boston Church of Christ." In the early 1980s the church sent disciples across the United States and around the world to establish its ministry of discipleship, and thereby, to disciple the world.

Because the leadership believed that the biblical model for naming churches was to name them after the city where they were established, they named them the Stockholm Church of Christ or the Dallas-Ft. Worth Church of Christ, etc. They authorize one church per city. According to figures in 1997, the International Churches of Christ has planted churches on every continent,is currently active in 115 countries, has 292 congregations around the world, and has a membership of 143,000. The church has been embarrassed in recent years by the departure of thousands of members who no longer could live under the smothering control of the church. Ex-members confide that as many people are fleeing the church's bondage as are joining.

According to a *Time* magazine article, 16 May 1992, the Boston Church utilizes a "control system" that is designed to focus all the energies of the member on bringing new people into the church. Mark Trahan, a former member in New York, said, "All you think about is recruiting." It becomes a way of life inside the group.

Trahan goes on to say that once members leave the church, they become "marked" people and are shunned by members who are directed to no longer have any contact with them.

As we continue our examination of the Boston Church Movement, we will see how it embraces legalism. Legalism often opens the door to another gospel—a gospel, in this case, that ultimately says the cross is not enough to gain our salvation.

Church Teaching and Belief

On the surface the Boston Church is much like other Churches of Christ in relationship to their teaching and doctrine. Both teach the necessity of water baptism by immersion, the innocence of infants, the invalidity of original sin, and that musical instruments are not to be a part of worship.

However, the Boston Church and the mainline Church of Christ differ on several counts. The Boston Church utilizes a hierarchical structure of church organization rather than one that reflects the independent nature of the local church. The Boston Church further differs from the mainline body in its controlling method of discipleship which represents the most serious concern about the church.

Discipleship, Boston Church style, is a requirement for the believer. There are no options. Each member has a discipler and is held accountable to the church by that individual. Disciples are not allowed to make basic decisions on their own, but must conform to the wishes of the discipler and ultimately the church.

Disciples are given direction on every aspect of their lives, from church attendance and giving, to dating habits or personal relationships, from where to live to their sex lives, and a multitude of decisions in between. The lives of disciples are closely regulated and controlled. The leadership maintains that this is all done for the glory of God.

In an article by Stephen F. Cannon, *The Boston Church of Christ- -Has Mind Control Come to Beantown?*, the author gives us an insight into how the discipling program is structured. “New converts are discipled by older converts. The older converts are discipled by Bible talk leaders. The Bible talk leaders are discipled by zone evangelists. The zone evangelists are discipled by Kip McKean and the elders.”

McKean is the absolute leader. He determines “how far a congregation will go in obeying the Scriptures by how consistently he corrects mistakes, rebukes sin, encourages obedience and by impartially carrying out the instructions of God . . . the Evangelist must know where the church is in the eyes of God, where it is headed and what it will take to get where God wants it to be.”

This type of authoritarian leadership is not supported by Scripture. Rather, mutual servanthood was the model given to us by Jesus and Paul (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; 1 Thess. 2:5-12; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). Scripture is clear in its teaching regarding to whom we are to be accountable: 1 Timothy 2:5 states that Jesus is our mediator, not man.

Baptism equals salvation. As mentioned earlier, the Boston Church agrees with the mainline Church of Christ on basic doctrine. Generally, the Boston Church is in agreement that the member must be baptized by the Church of Christ by immersion to receive his or her salvation. However, the Boston Church goes one step further and says that the member must be a disciple in order for his or her baptism to count for salvation.

In other words, for the Boston Church, faith in Christ and His death for our sins is not enough for the believer to be acceptable before God; he must also be baptized by the “true” church as a disciple. The Bible, however, offers the unbeliever a simple option: believe on (trust in, have faith in, rely on) Christ and you will be saved; that is, the penalty of sin is wiped away and the person is spiritually adopted (born again) into God’s family (Rom. 10:9). God does not place restrictions on us as sinners; He only asks us to believe and exercise our faith.

Abusive Behavior in The Church

There are many ways for abuse to become a controlling element

in a church body. Later we will look at specific ways one can avoid deception. But for now, let's look at a few ways that we can discern abusive behavior in the church.

Excessive Control. A key element almost always found in abusive churches is a leadership that is excessive in controlling its members. Pat Zukeran, an apologist and an authority on The Boston Church Movement, says this about control-oriented leadership: "The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self- confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God."

Personal Interpretation of Scripture. Another element of abuse that usually accompanies this style of leadership is the insistence on a personal interpretation of the Scriptures, and in some cases, even re-writing the Scriptures to underscore personal ideas and hobbyhorses. This level of manipulation opens the door to a subtle control that affects how one thinks and pulls the member more deeply into the web of deception.

The Bible challenges us to seek its counsel rather than that of men. We are to measure all teachings against the Word of God. We find an example of this counsel in Acts 17:11 where the Apostle Paul places himself under the authority of the Scripture.

Manipulation of Church Membership. Psychological manipulation is another element of abuse that may be found in abusive churches. It is most always very subtle and is usually a highly skilled method of control. The use of unwarranted guilt, intimidation, peer pressure, threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience, and confessional are among the methods employed to manipulate the member.

Stephen F. Cannon, mentioned earlier, says that "the chief

tool to keep the flock in line seems to be the doctrine of personal confession to one's discipler." Cannon continues by quoting Rev. Buddy Martin, of Cape Cod Church of Christ, who claims that "almost everyone in the Boston Church of Christ tells their secrets." Martin further confirmed that "those secrets are often used against the person if they don't follow the party line' and do what the elders want them to do."

This kind of manipulation is foreign to our Lord, who sacrificially gave of Himself for others. Jesus' example is one of humility and service, not the dogmatism and arrogance found in those who would abuse their followers.

One True Church. Another characteristic of an abusive church is that it often establishes itself as being the only "true" church. In their methodology all other churches are wrong or practice false doctrine. The Boston Church, like other churches with abusive traits, do not allow for any outside teaching that may be contrary to their interpretation of "truth."

Unquestioning Submission. The abusive church demands undying allegiance to its leadership and its doctrinal positions. It becomes authoritative on every element and aspect in the life of the believer. There is no room for another position to be considered.

Understanding Thought Reform

Abusive churches such as the Boston Church Movement and others use thought reform as a standard element in their program of recruitment. The key to their success is the ability to keep the subject unaware of being manipulated and controlled.

Mindbending or thought reform is carried out in a sophisticated program that incorporates three elements to bring the desired result. First, those who use thought control endeavor to convince their subjects that their past is wrong

and that it has negatively influenced their present life. Second, abusive leaders make every effort to gain control over the personal wills of their subjects by introducing mind-altering activities into their normal routine. Third, the goal of such groups is to alter their trainees' normal thought processes and bring them to a neutral, non-resistant state of mind so that the minds of the trainees can be effectively reprogrammed.

All thought reform cults use this type of mind control. The methods used include meditation techniques, pray-reading, chanting mantras, sleep deprivation, and other techniques that alter one's conscious awareness of reality.

Once the group has gained control of the new convert's mind, an intensive time of reprogramming or indoctrination is begun to establish the group's goals and to begin the reinterpretation of "truth" or other beliefs. The key to this process of thought reform is to keep the subject unaware of the manipulation that is taking place in his or her mind.

How does thought reform work? Listed below are some of the tactics used by thought-reform programs according to Margaret Thaler Singer, clinical psychologist and emeritus professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Cults In Our Midst—The Hidden Menace In Our Everyday Lives.*

The first tactic is to "destabilize a person's sense of self." In essence, cultivate an environment of community in the individual that eliminates his or her personhood, thereby creating an identity crisis within the individual.

The second tactic is to move people to radically reinterpret their life history, dramatically alter their worldview, and wholeheartedly embrace a new conception of reality.

And the third tactic used by the group is to "develop in the person a dependency on the organization, and thereby turn the person into a deployable agent of the organization."

Dr. Singer offers six conditions that are employed to gain the desirable results of thought reform. The first condition that must be accomplished is to keep the new seekers “unaware that there is an agenda to control or change” them.

The second is to control their “time and physical environment.” Converts are denied an opportunity to interact with family or friends, and they are subjected to a schedule that utilizes every minute of their day without giving them a chance to find time alone.

The third condition is to “create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency.” The group systematically eliminates the individual’s support system. The organization may implement a system of rigid control that dictates where people work or live, how they spend their spare time, and other aspects of personal freedom, consequently increasing their sense of powerlessness.

The fourth condition is to “suppress old behavior and attitudes.” By creating the right environment, new recruits’ prior ideas about right and wrong become irrelevant as the group continues to define the approved agenda of thought.

The fifth condition that must be met is to “instill new behavior and attitudes” so the new converts will readily assimilate into the organization. A system of rewards and punishment is instituted to further control. The goal is for the seekers to accept the new philosophy without question.

The sixth, and last condition that Dr. Singer offers, is to “put forth a closed system of logic” that deters any ability to question the authority of the leadership. Such a program allows no opportunity to express doubt or offer any kind of contradiction that would bring into question the veracity of the organization. The individual is always wrong in such a case and the organization is always right.

These six conditions are utilized to varying degrees by all

groups that attempt to reform a new convert’s thought. It is no less than subtle brainwashing, and it is destructive in the long term.

If we are to guard our minds from the enemy and renew them as the Scriptures challenge us to do, then we must remain vigilant. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived.

Avoiding Deception

Previously we have dealt with the Boston Church and its abusive nature. We have also looked at thought reform and how the cults can use it to control their membership. In our last segment we are going to look at practical ways that we, as Christians, can avoid being deceived by those who would entrap us by false teaching.

Deception is a mainstay of thought reform cults and groups. It is a subtle form of manipulation that erodes the personal freedom of individuals. In an age that has produced the Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate cults, it has become imperative for us to protect ourselves and our loved ones from those who would deceive and abuse us. Here are several practical ways we can prevent deception in our lives.

ONE: Be careful who you share your problems and spiritual struggles with. On the one hand, you should be open and accepting of others. On the other hand, you need to be cautious around people you do not know personally because devious individuals could use the information you share to take advantage of you. However, if people want to discuss their problems or their spiritual life with you, keep the focus of such discussions on them and off of you. (This approach will not allow someone, who may be out to solicit you into an aberrant group, to seduce you in a time of vulnerability.)

TWO: Be aware of Bible studies or meetings that are offered

outside of known Christian groups or organizations. If you are unsure about a particular group, check it out by asking your pastor or other legitimate spiritual authorities.

THREE: Sincerity does not equal truth. If someone uses Christian terminology and is accommodating they may be camouflaging their true intent—deception—by meeting your social and personal need to belong. Remember legitimate groups are up front and more than willing to identify who they are and what they are about.

FOUR: Avoid groups that do not allow you to question their teaching or authority. Non-Christian groups attempt to mislead the individual regarding their true beliefs and goals by not allowing the prospective member to ask needed questions.

FIVE: Avoid groups that (1) do not allow you time to reflect on what you have been taught or (2) encourage you to become overly involved in "church" activity or (3) refuse to grant you the time and freedom you need to make unhurried and unpressured decisions about your spiritual life.

SIX: Be aware of groups that attempt to limit or sever your relationship with your family, your church, and long-standing friends in the faith—people who are, in effect, your support net.

SEVEN: Be aware of groups that supplant individuality and personal freedom with a communal identity.

EIGHT: Make an effort to discover what kind of authority the group operates under. Do members have leeway in making decisions about their present and future, or are they manipulated to do what the group desires?

Scripture warns about those who would bring dissension into the church. Romans 16:17 states, "I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught;

avoid them."

2 Peter 2:1 tells us that, "false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . and in their greed they will exploit you with false words."

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.