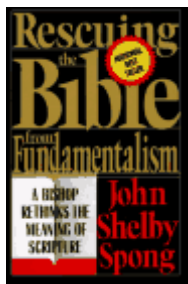


Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.



Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.[\[1\]](#) The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that

are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to “be all that one can be.”[\[2\]](#) Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without “religion.” In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of “religious” sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

Bishop Spong’s View of Scripture

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong’s view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there is “no such thing as ‘objective history’.”[\[3\]](#) The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, "The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God."[\[4\]](#) In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that "We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us."[\[5\]](#) He adds that "We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . ."[\[6\]](#)

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-nine pages of Spong's "rescuing" focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, "Why bother?" If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what's in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God's supernatural interaction or intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

A Sex Driven Gospel

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.[\[7\]](#) Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system."[\[8\]](#) Spong writes, "So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed." In other words, we are to ignore what Paul

actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong's liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."[\[9\]](#) When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring "I'm not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . ." Spong's reply doesn't seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

Who Is Jesus?

Let's turn our focus to Spong's view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ's authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God's only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that "the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated."[\[10\]](#) All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul "quite obviously was not a trinitarian."[\[11\]](#) Christ is "the hero of a thousand faces" and "many things to many people."[\[12\]](#) "All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ."[\[13\]](#) He adds that, "A Christianity

that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying.”{14}
What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spongs finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is remarkably predictable. He writes, “. . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ.”{15} This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God’s wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a “terrifying, barrier- free love.”{16}

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus’ life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong’s views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is “self-realization.”{17}

Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is

irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.[\[18\]](#) Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."[\[19\]](#) It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into

one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the [Jesus Seminar](#) and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."[\[20\]](#) Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of

Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.

19. Ibid.

20. Spong, 4.

© 2000 Probe Ministries International

See Also *Probe Answers Our Email:*

["Bishop Spong is a Hero!"](#)

Justin Martyr: Defender for the Church

Justin's Conversion and Writings

In a [previous article](#) I talked about the persecutions Christians experienced in the early church.[{1}](#) One of the striking characteristics of persecuted Christians was the courage they exhibited on their way to execution. In fact, we're told by an adult convert of the early second century that this courage was a factor in making him open to the gospel. This convert was a philosopher named Justin, whom you might be familiar with as Justin Martyr. Justin was one of the church's earliest apologists or defenders. Church historian Robert Grant says Justin was "the most important second century apologist."[{2}](#) As we consider the work of Justin, along the way we'll see some similarities in the charges made

against Christians in his day and ours. Maybe we can learn something from this second century Christian.

Justin's Life

It is believed that Justin was born shortly after 100 A.D. His birthplace was Flavia Neapolis, in Syria-Palestine, or Samaria.[\[3\]](#) Justin's childhood education included rhetoric, poetry, and history. As a young adult he took a special interest in philosophy, and studied primarily Stoicism and Platonism.[\[4\]](#) Justin was searching for God, which "is the goal of Plato's philosophy," he said.[\[5\]](#)

Justin was introduced to the faith directly by an old man who engaged him in discussion about philosophical issues and then told him about Jesus. He took Justin to the Hebrew prophets who were before the philosophers, he said, and who spoke "as reliable witnesses of the truth."[\[6\]](#) They prophesied of the coming of Christ, and their prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Justin said that afterward "my spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. . . . it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Savior's words."[\[7\]](#) Justin sought out Christians who taught him history and Christian doctrine, and then "devoted himself wholly to the spread and vindication of the Christian religion."[\[8\]](#)

Justin continued to wear the cloak which identified him as a philosopher, and he taught students in Ephesus and later in Rome. James Kiefer notes that "he engaged in debates and disputations with non-Christians of all varieties, pagans, Jews, and heretics."[\[9\]](#)

Justin's conviction of the truth of Christ was so complete, that he died a martyr's death somewhere around 165 A.D. Eusebius, the early church historian, said he was denounced by

the Cynic Crescens with whom he engaged in debate shortly before his death.{10} Justin was beheaded along with six of his students.

Historian Philip Schaff sums up Justin's character and ministry this way:

He had acquired considerable classical and philosophical culture before his conversion, and then made it subservient to the defense of the faith. He was not a man of genius and accurate scholarship, but of respectable talent, extensive reading, and enormous memory. . . . He had the courage of a confessor in life and of a martyr in death. It is impossible not to admire his fearless devotion to the cause of truth and the defense of his persecuted brethren.{11}

Justin's Writings

Several books have been attributed to Justin, but only three are universally accepted as genuine. They are what are now called the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology*, and the *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*. His *First Apology* was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, who reigned from 138-161 A.D., his sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius, and to the Roman Senate and "the whole Roman people." {12} The *Second Apology* was apparently addressed to the Roman Senate, although it originally might have been attached to the *First*. Both were written in response to persecution.

Justin and Greek Philosophy

Justin's understanding of Christianity was filtered through the philosophy he had learned. The Platonism of Justin's day had a strong theistic bent, and its high moral tone seemed to accord with Christianity. Justin (and others) connected the Logos of philosophy with the Logos of John chapter 1. Historian Philip Schaff describes the thinking this way:

The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational. The Logos endowed all men with reason and freedom, which are not lost by the fall. He scattered seeds of truth before his incarnation, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and barbarians, especially among philosophers and poets, who are the prophets of the heathen. Those who lived reasonably and virtuously in obedience to this preparatory light were Christians in fact, though not in name; while those who lived unreasonably were Christless and enemies of Christ. Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.[{13}](#)

In addition to this source of truth, Justin (and others) believed that the teachings of Moses were handed down through the Egyptians to the Greeks.[{14}](#) God was not simply known through abstract reasoning; He made Himself known personally as well as He spoke to the prophets who in turn made Him known to us.[{15}](#)

If Justin's idea about Christ and the Logos seems odd, we should keep in mind that we, too, typically understand Christianity through the categories of the philosophies of our day. We aren't completely neutral readers of Scripture.

For example, in modern times science has been considered to be the supreme source of truth. This fed the development of evidential apologetics. This is a method which emphasizes historical and natural facts as evidences for the faith. But scholars have come to see that facts aren't the completely value-free "truths" modernism taught. Other Christians who object to what they consider such an overly rationalistic approach have drawn from existentialist philosophers who are more concerned with the human condition. In other areas, too, we reveal the ideals of modernism in our Christian lives. How many "how-to" books are on the shelves of Christian

bookstores? There is a tendency to take a “do this and such-and-such will result” attitude about our personal and spiritual development. Proper technique is a very modernistic notion.

Thus, we shouldn't be too harsh with Justin Martyr. He was a man of his times who did his best to explicate and defend Christian beliefs using the framework of thought with which he was familiar. In doing so, he was a significant force in the development of Christian theology and apologetics in the early church.

Justin's Apologetics

Christians Treated Unfairly

In his two Apologies, Justin's primary goal was to defend *Christians* rather than *Christianity per se*.[\[16\]](#) Christians were being treated unfairly; Justin's ambition was to get fair treatment for them. Persecution had advanced to the point where Christians were worthy of judgment just for bearing the name *Christian*. Their odd worship habits, their refusal to participate in the civic cults and in emperor worship, and their strange beliefs were enough to create a general bias against them. Thus it was that under some emperors and local governors Christians could be brought to trial just for bearing the name.

Christians and Atheism

Part of the problem was a misrepresentation of Christian beliefs. Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists. Justin asked how they could be atheists since they worshipped “the Most True God.” Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and “pay homage to them in reason and truth.” Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, but

they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter but were honored by governmental leaders. {17}

Christians and Citizenship

Another accusation against Christians was that they were enemies of the state. Their lack of participation in pagan religious rituals, which were a part of everyday public life during those days, and their talk about belonging to another kingdom led to charges that they weren't good citizens. Justin responded they weren't looking for an earthly kingdom, one that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn't go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that "we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace," because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives. {18} "Only God do we worship," he said, "but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men." {19} As a specific example of being good citizens, Justin cited that Christians are faithful in paying taxes because Jesus said they should (Matt. 22:20-21). Justin's general argument was that by living virtuous lives, something highly regarded in Greek philosophy, Christians were by conviction good citizens.

The Situation Today

Does this kind of situation sound familiar to you? Today, bearing the name *fundamentalist* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, close-minded, and certainly harmful to society. {20} If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting red in the face and sinking to the level of name-calling in response, but by setting forth what we really

believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren't harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further and show how the morality of our day is harmful to society. This might be persuasive to some, but certainly not on everyone, maybe not on most. But in clarifying what we believe and why we believe it, we will strengthen the church, and this is important if, as I think, believers are weakened more through name-calling and ostracism than through attacks on doctrine.

Christianity as Moral

In addition to being called enemies of the state and atheists, Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. For example, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character.

For one thing, Justin said, Christians demonstrated their honesty by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They loved truth more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies.

This attitude of living according to truth was one example of the change brought about in people's lives following their conversion. One writer notes that this change came to be known as "the triumphal song of the Apologists."[\[21\]](#) Justin said:

We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe

because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly. . . .[{22}](#)

Justin also emphasized the chaste behavior of Christians, in response to accusations of immoral behavior during worship. To show how far that was from the truth, he told the story of a young man who asked that a surgeon make him a eunuch to prove that Christians do not practice promiscuity. The request was denied, so the young man chose to remain unmarried and accountable to fellow believers.[{23}](#)

One of Justin's apologetical tactics was to contrast what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for it, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of men and animals on their idols. Christians were accused of sexual immorality, but it was their critics, Justin said, who imitated "Jupiter and the other gods in sodomy and sinful relations with women."[{24}](#)

Today, Christians who oppose abortion are said to hate women. Those who believe that homosexuality is wrong are called hate-mongers. When we try to present our case as Justin did it can be hard to get a hearing. This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to clarify our beliefs or even to show how critics can be as immoral as they accuse Christians of being.[{25}](#) What we need to remember is that a clarification of Christian teachings isn't enough. It wasn't in Justin's day. Consider the means he listed by which people were brought to Christ. He said that many were "turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their

honesty in business matters.”{26} Christians’ high moral character, even though often maligned, is a powerful witness and apologetic for the faith.

Justin’s Case for Christ

As part of his defense of Christians before the Emperor and Roman Senate, Justin also argued that Christianity was true. This was important because reason and the pursuit of truth were highly valued by the Roman intelligentsia. Since one of the charges against Christians was that they held superstitious beliefs, it had to be shown that their beliefs were reasonable. Let’s consider Justin’s central case for the truth of Christianity, namely, that the coming of Christ—the Logos of God—was foretold through the Prophetic Spirit thousands of years in advance.

Eternal Logos

Earlier I spoke of how Christ was identified with the Logos—the locus of reason in the universe—of which the philosophers spoke. Speaking of Him in these terms would help gain a hearing from the cultured classes of his day. As one historian noted, “Whenever [the Logos] was mentioned the interest of all was at once secured.”{27} It was important to show the reasonableness of the faith, and the Logos was the locus of reason in major schools of Greek philosophy. To quote Philip Schaff again, “Christianity is the highest reason,” for Justin. “The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational.”{28} In addition to guaranteeing the rationality of Christianity, identifying Jesus as the Logos indicated His antiquity, which was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief. I should note here that this emphasis on reason should not leave us thinking that faith meant nothing for Justin. He repeatedly refers to faith in his apologies. He speaks of us being made whole “by faith

through the blood and the death of Christ.”{29} He even refers back to Abraham who “was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in Him.”{30} However, even here the matter of knowledge is central because Justin put more weight on believing in the teachings of Christ than on believing in Christ himself. *Fulfilled Prophecies* But why should this claim about Jesus be believed? The reason was that He was the fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years earlier which proved that He wasn’t just a man who could do magic, but the promised Son of God. “We are actual eye-witnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were foretold [sic],” he said.{31} Justin summarized the Old Testament prophecies about Christ this way:

In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called and actually being the Son of God. And that He would send certain persons to every nation to make known these things, and that the former Gentiles rather [than Jews] would believe in Him. He was foretold, in truth, before He actually appeared, first five thousand years before, then four thousand, then three thousand, then two thousand, then one thousand, and finally eight hundred. For, in succeeding generations new Prophets rose time and again.{32}

Not only was the fulfillment of prophecy remarkable in itself, but it was also significant that such prophecies were made long before the Greek philosophers, for, unlike today, antiquity was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief.

Conclusion

For all the weaknesses in his theology and apologetics, Justin

Martyr provides an example of those who took their faith very seriously in the early church, and who sought to be a mouthpiece for the Lord and a defender of His people. Schaff says that “[Justin’s writings] attest his honesty and earnestness, his enthusiastic love for Christianity, and his fearlessness in its defense against all assaults from without and perversions from within.”^{33} While it might seem to us that Christianity was really just philosophy to Justin, historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that Justin’s faith was fed more by what the church confessed about Christ than by his own philosophical speculation. “He was, after all, ready to lay down his life for Christ; and his martyrdom speaks louder, even doctrinally, than does his apologetics.”^{34}

Notes

1. Rick Wade, [Persecution in the Early Church](#), Probe Ministries, Sept. 1999.
2. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.
3. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 33.
4. James E. Kiefer, “Justin Martyr, Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr,” justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html.
5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 151.
6. Ibid., 159.
7. Ibid., 160.
8. Philip Schaff, Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325, vol. II in *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1910), 714.

9. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr."

10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "St. Justin Martyr." www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm. See also Justin's own prediction of his betrayal in *The Second Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 122-23.

11. Schaff, 715.

12. Justin, *First Apology*, 33.

13. Schaff, 723.

14. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, s.v. "Platonism and Neoplatonism," by A. Hilary Armstrong. See also Justin, *First Apology*, 81.

15. *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

16. Robert Grant believes it was the martyrdom of Polycarp in Rome which prompted Justin to write to the emperor. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 53.

17. Justin, *First Apology*, 37-39.

18. Ibid., 43-44.

19. Ibid., 52.

20. The reader might want to see my article [Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society](#).

21. Thomas B. Falls, in Justin, *First Apology*, 47, note 2.

22. Justin, *First Apology*, 47.

23. Ibid., 65.

24. Ibid., 133.

25. This kind of discussion can be difficult in general because of the moral relativism of our day. A good book to read which shows that Americans aren't as relativistic as they seem to think is William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996). For a summary presentation of Watkins' ideas, see my article [The New Absolutes](#).

26. Justin, *First Apology*, 50.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, quoted in J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 46.

28. Schaff, 723.

29. Justin, *Dialogue*, 166.

30. Ibid., 183.

31. Justin, *First Apology*, 66.

32. Ibid., 68.

33. Schaff, 719.

34. Pelikan, 143.

©2000 Probe Ministries.

Culture Wars

America at (Culture) War

Americans are highly polarized when it comes to issues of morality and social norms. We feel our collective blood pressure rise as we read the daily paper or watch the news on

television. We all feel the tension caused by problems like teen pregnancies, abortion, crime, poverty, and political corruption. Factions from across the political spectrum respond with social programs and ideals that, if instituted, they are sure would make America a better place for all to live. However, the problem is that these programs or ideals are often in direct conflict with each other, presupposing very different assumptions about human nature. To highlight these differences, consider the following events.

In the early '90s the American Civil Liberty Union informed members of the California State Assembly's Education Committee that they were opposed to a bill the committee was considering. The bill, which called for traditional values in school curricula, was offensive to the ACLU because it would mandate that students be taught that monogamous, heterosexual relations solely within marriage is a traditional American value. The ACLU argued that this would be an "unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools." {1} They went on to contend that the bill was an obvious violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, a private school in Georgia asked a student to either change his behavior or leave the school. This, in itself, is not a rare event. However, the student wasn't a discipline problem and he wasn't failing academically. In fact, he was popular and liked by many on campus. The problem was that he was cross-dressing. He dressed and behaved as a woman and was accepted by many students as a female. When the student chose to leave the school instead of changing his attire, the school's drama teacher remarked, "I really think that we all lost something precious that night." {2}

To many Americans, the ACLU's action in the first incident is incomprehensible. It seems reasonable, healthy, and obvious for schools to implement a "traditional values" model for sex education. Those on the side of the ACLU find it just as incomprehensible that anyone would see their position as

unreasonable or unusual. Some might find the expulsion of the cross-dressing student to be grossly unfair, while most parents would wonder why the school took so long to act.

Regardless of your perspective, everyone agrees that Americans find themselves with deep differences on a number of fundamental issues that govern our daily affairs. Unfortunately, these deep differences have led some Americans to bomb a government building, shoot abortion doctors, or burn down a mountain top ski resort in order to further their cause.

This article will spotlight the culture war we find ourselves in and consider what a biblical response might be. Although few Christians fail to see the conflict in our society, particularly in our schools, they are far from united as to what our response should be. However, from a historical perspective, times of cultural disruption are often a great opportunity for the church, if it is being all that God desires it to be.

Orthodox vs. Progressive

Leaders of all political persuasions have taken note of the culture war that is engulfing our nation. To begin clarifying the issue, we will consider the contribution of two books that have helped to define the conflict for many religious and cultural conservatives: James Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* and William Bennett's *The De-Valuing of America*. Bennett argues that the battle over our culture is being fought between what he calls the liberal elite and the rest of society. The elite are "found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media."³ He feels that they are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters and opinion makers. Differing

from traditional elite groups in American history, Bennett argues that these people reject the traditional bourgeois emphasis on work, frugality, sexual restraint, and self-control.”{4} As evidence for the existence of this elite, he refers to studies done by Stanley Rothman with Robert and Linda Richter. Their work portrays a media aristocracy that votes as a block for liberal candidates and on issues like abortion, gay rights, and the environment.{5}

Bennett adds that this elite is marked by a wholesale rejection of American ideals, a calling into question of what has been known as the American dream.{6} Evidence is not as significant as ideology for the elite. Their approach is “one of vindication, not investigation.”{7} If the middle class and the Republicans are for something, this group will instinctively be against it.

Hunter’s approach to defining the warring camps is subtler and, I feel, more accurate. He would argue that there is an elite on both sides of the culture war. On the one hand is what he calls the “orthodox” group. They have a commitment to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. From an evangelical perspective this is the God of the Bible. He is a consistent and unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity. Hunter would also include Jews and others who hold to a definable, unchanging, absolute authority.

Opposing this group are the “progressives.” Progressives are defined by the ideals of modernism, rationalism, and subjectivism. To these people truth is more a process than a constant authority. It is an unfolding reality rather than an unchanging revelation. What is interesting about the progressives is that they often hold on to the religious heritage of the orthodox, but reinterpret its meaning for modern consumption. For instance, to a gay progressive, Christ came not to free us from the penalty of sin, but to free gays from the constraints of society. Although many progressives

discard religion altogether, those who claim the Christian tradition have usually adopted a liberation theology, liberating the individual from any obligation other than to love each other in a very vague sense. To love each other seems to mean allowing people do whatever is expedient in their lives.

The real difference between the “orthodox” and the “progressives” is at the faith level. Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian or not is not nearly as important as what kind of reality they place their faith in. Hunter believes that the culture war is a war of worldviews, and that these worldviews cause us to see the world differently. How then should a Christian, one who places his faith in the sacrificial death of Christ as an atoning payment for his sins, respond to this culture war?

The Angry Christian

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the secular world Christians are often seen as angry, intolerant people. At school board meetings, outside abortion clinics, even at the funeral of a homosexual who was murdered because of his lifestyle, Christians are there to angrily condemn sin and its perpetrators. It is almost as if Christians are surprised by sin and feel that their only response is to point people to the law of God. As a result, many outside the church see Christianity as a religion of law, similar to most other world religions. This is a tragedy.

Although understandable, I don't believe that we are called as Christians to respond to the culture war in anger, especially anger directed at people. Although the wrath of God is evident in both the Old and New Testaments, condemnation of human anger is also present in each. Near the very beginning of human culture, God warns Cain about his anger and downcast face. Instead of seeking to do what was right, Cain was angry with God and his situation (Gen. 4:6-7). The wisdom literature

of Proverbs teaches us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," and "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated" (Prov. 14:17, 15:1).

In the New Testament, Paul condemns "hatred" and "fits of rage" immediately before listing the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. James 1:19-20 is fairly straightforward in arguing that, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Jesus set an extraordinarily high standard against anger and hatred in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is speaking to the root cause of much evil in any society: an angry, unforgiving heart.

Some may respond that righteous indignation, or anger against sin is merely emulating Christ. After all, Jesus cleared the Temple with a whip and violently overturned the moneylender's tables. Are we not allowed the same righteous indignation? I think not, especially if we take seriously God's admonition to let Him be in charge of judgment and vengeance (Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul tells us to feed our enemy if he is hungry, give him drink if he is thirsty, and to overcome evil by doing good (Rom. 12:20-21). The difference between Jesus' righteous indignation and our anger is that Jesus, being God, has the right to judge, and being perfectly righteous His judgment is perfect. He knows the hearts of men and has no bias other than holiness itself. On the other hand, we are often most angry when our personal comfort is disturbed. To the watching world, Christians become the most interested in politics when their personal wealth or comfort is at stake.

I don't believe that God is calling His people to anger in America. We bring a message of grace to the lost, not a message of law.

Apathy

Many Christians have been active in the culture war since the early '80s. With the rise of conservative politics and the family values movement, Christians joined the Republican party in droves and joined numerous organizations in order to help fight against the moral decline of the nation. Given the popularity of the current Democratic President and what appears, in many ways, to be a rejection of the conservative moral agenda, it is tempting for many to simply retreat from activism all together.

Some Christians never did get engaged in a counter-cultural sense. In fact, an early evangelical leader in culture war activity, Francis Schaeffer, warned that most Christians were more concerned with personal peace and affluence than about having an impact in their society.^{8} He was concerned that as the Christian- dominated consensus weakened, these two values would grow in their place. The picture of society we are left with is one in which people's lives are consumed by things, buying two SUV's and a nice big house in the suburbs, with a nice tall fence, color TV (a big color TV), and remote. These people do not want to know about the suffering in our urban ghettos or about the plight of Christians in other countries. They want their lives to be unimpeded by the turmoil experienced by less affluent people.

Is it wrong to have a nice house and cars? No, it isn't. But neither is it the ultimate purpose to which our Lord has called us. Gathering nice things should not be motivating our daily activities. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He responded that we are to first, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), and second, love our neighbor as ourselves. For Christians, success in

this life should be measured against these two goals. The rest of revelation, both the written Word and the life of Christ, gives us a picture of what this means in both the general culture and within the church. Christ gave us the Great Commission, to go into all nations making disciples and teaching what He taught (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul talks about us being living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds so that we will know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

To be indifferent about sin is to not love God; this form of apathy is incompatible with true Christian faith. However, to be indifferent about suffering in the world is equally incompatible with our faith. To ignore oppression and hatred reveals a lack of love for our neighbors. Too often Christians only seem to get excited when their rights, whether property or religious, are threatened. This makes a mockery of our Lord's words when He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Romans 12 Paul talks about blessing those who persecute you, and if it is possible, to be at peace with everyone around you.

Hebrews 12 tells us to throw off everything that entangles us, everything that keeps us from running the race marked out for us by Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Him, who endured the cross because its joyous result would be a redeemed people of God.

Ambassadors For Christ

When thinking about how to respond to the culture war in America, or in any culture, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we are trying to accomplish? In the language of real war, What are our tactical and strategic goals? Some might respond that we are here to fight sin, to rid our society of the evils of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, drug abuse, political corruption, etc. There are Christians who claim that our

primary cultural objective is to reinstate the law of Moses by taking control of the government and using its legal authority to impose a moral society on the population. However, this does not appear to be the plan revealed to us in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul details the role we are to play in America or in any country we might live in. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, and our message is one of reconciliation with God. There are many religions pushing a message of law; Islam, Judaism, and most Eastern religions all focus on the works people must do in order to please God or the gods. They focus on how humanity must reform itself to gain God's favor. Christianity's message is grace, and as Christ's ambassadors we proclaim that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ by making "Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God is making the righteousness of Christ available to sinners; salvation is the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our personal account, thus satisfying the judgment of a holy God against our personal sins.

What about social activism, what about politics? Do we just share the gospel and ignore the problems facing our nation? No, we are to be salt and light in a decaying world. However, our trust is not in politics, which can only change a nation's laws and to a lesser degree its people's behavior. Even if abortion ended tomorrow, if every homosexual became heterosexual, and if drugs and pornography were things of the past, people without Christ would still be lost in their sins.

The role of an ambassador is a complex one. He or she must be intimately familiar with the nature of their sovereign's kingdom. Christians must seek to know God and His message in a way that can be communicated to the culture they live in. Unfortunately, Christians often know the message, but have a difficult time communicating it in a way that the surrounding culture understands, and in a way that answers the questions

being asked by that society. Stating the gospel accurately and in a meaningful manner is central to being an effective ambassador for Christ.

If we are to respond to the culture war by being ambassadors for Christ, then the vitality of the church becomes far more important than controlling the White House or Congress. Understanding how to communicate the gospel of Christ becomes infinitely more valuable than having the most potent political strategy. Being faithful to Christ in this way builds Gods kingdom on earth and results in common grace as more and more believers participate in every aspect of our culture.

Notes

1. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 310.
2. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 October 1998, 7A.
3. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Bennett, 12.
7. Ibid.
8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How then Shall We Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 205.

Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

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

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



Background

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

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

Reasons for Persecution

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

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it

seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

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

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"{3}

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

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

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

Emperors

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

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.[{8}](#) But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.[{9}](#) In A.D. 62 he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.[{10}](#) Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."[{11}](#) Schaff says

that “there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since...A ‘vast multitude’ of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner.”{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.{14}

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

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians’ practices weren’t too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.{16} Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?{17}

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

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan’s reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: “Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones,

the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus.”{20}

Hadrian

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

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat “indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it.”{23} Philip Schaff tells us that “he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion.”{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor (“the personal embodiment of the sovereign state”{25}). “It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,...Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as ‘Lord.’”{26}

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the

reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.{27} After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.{28}

Marcus Aurelius

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

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians." {30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy... Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself." {31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.{32} In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give

testimony against their masters.{33} “The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets,” says Philip Schaff, “were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil.”{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina “strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ.”{35} “At last,” Schaff tells us, “the people grew weary of slaughter,” and the persecutions died down.{36}

Septimius Severus

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

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.{42}

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

Decius Trajan

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state

religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.{43}

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

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

Diocletian

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

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

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued

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

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

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

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."[\[54\]](#) Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that

“most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

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

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

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

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it?

“Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too.” By God’s grace we don’t endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.[\[56\]](#)

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

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let’s not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.
6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Nero,” by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.

11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.
32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.
35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
39. Schaff, 57.
40. Bruce, 179.
41. Schaff, 58.

42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.
43. Ibid., 60.
44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.
45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.
55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

© 1999 Probe Ministries International

The Moral Fallout of the '98 Elections

Now that the November elections have passed, it is time to apply a little 20/20 hindsight to the results. An initial observation is that even the experts were surprised by the

outcome, as Democrats gained five seats against the Republican majority in the House, while drawing even in the Senate. Less than a month before the elections, the political director of the Democratic National Committee stated that losing less than twenty-six House seats and less than six Senate seats would be a victory for Democrats. Even moderate political analysts believed that Republicans would secure net gains of eight House seats, three Senate seats, and three governorships. Yet, this election was the first one since the presidency of FDR in which the party of the president did not lose seats in a congressional election. It would seem that these elections deserve special consideration.

The reason why so many had expected poor election results for the Democrats was obviously the scandal that has enveloped the Clinton presidency in the last year. Many Republican leaders seemed to regard the election as a referendum on the President, discounting polls which suggested otherwise. The question is, How could so many "experts" have so misread this election?

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of this year's results has to do with the vote of religious conservatives. By comparing this year's vote with the elections of 1994, when Republicans regained control of the House after years of a Democratic majority, we notice a major shift in the voting activity of the so-called "religious right." In 1994, 67 percent of self-described religious conservatives voted Republican for Congress, while only 20 percent voted for Democrats. In the 1998 elections, however, 54 percent of religious conservatives voted Republican, and 31 percent voted for Democrats, a significant 24 percent swing.

This, in itself, helps explain the strong showing of Democrats, but prompts the question, Why did religious conservatives have such a dramatic shift in voting patterns? Several attempts will be made here to answer this question.

Earlier this year, James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* issued a kind of ultimatum to the Republican Party leadership. Expressing frustration at the failure of Republicans to pass significant legislation in areas such as abortion, he threatened to take as many of his radio listeners as he could away from the Republican Party if they did not make more of an effort to focus on social issues important to evangelicals. Immediately after that threat, there was a sudden emphasis by Republican leaders on abortion and homosexuality, and once again the ban on partial-birth abortions was brought to a vote. However, it was again vetoed by President Clinton. Even though, in that respect, Republicans have made an effort to reflect the social concerns of evangelical Christians, their failure to make any progress even with a majority may have left many supporters alienated.

Another factor may have been the failure of Republicans to stand up to President Clinton in the last-minute budget negotiations in October. Instead of pressing for their own agenda months earlier, when Mr. Clinton was at his weakest, Republicans were pressed into a corner by the threat of another government shutdown. Their failure to acknowledge that their constituents were concerned with more than just President Clinton's behavior ultimately seems to have backfired. The main message this year was that conservatives themselves sent a message to Republicans that they can no longer be counted on to simply vote anti-Democrat. As Steve Forbes has said, "A party that loses sight of its values and principles loses its base."

Presidential Scandal and the '98 Elections

Republicans and Democrats alike had anticipated major gains for the Republicans in the House, mainly because of the scandal involving President Clinton. House Speaker Newt Gingrich had predicted a gain of as many as thirty seats. Yet

when the votes were tallied, Democrats had actually gained five seats, and Newt Gingrich has now resigned his position as Speaker of the House. Does this mean that voters rejected an agenda favorable to religious conservatives?

Many Christians have been dismayed by the apparent lack of voters who were willing to punish Mr. Clinton for his actions. Of course, Mr. Clinton himself was not running for office, but it was thought that, by voting against Democrats, voters would signal their disapproval of President Clinton's behavior. Instead, it appears that voters voted for candidates on their own merits; it would seem that voters were in most respects voting *for* candidates and issues, not just *against* Mr. Clinton.

Some, associating the Democratic Party with the Lewinski scandal, have suggested that the positive gains of Democrats indicates that Americans are less and less concerned about the morality of their political leaders. Several factors have to be considered before making that judgment. In the first place, no single party has a monopoly on morality. This became especially evident when it was revealed in recent months that several prominent Republicans had been involved in sexual affairs in the past. And even though the current legal issue against Mr. Clinton is all about perjury under oath and suborning of perjury, as well as possible obstruction of justice, it is impossible to separate these issues from President Clinton's involvement with Ms. Lewinski. Consequently, the emphasis in the press on the sexual nature of the scandal has led many to conclude that Mr. Clinton's behavior is not unique.

Another key factor in how the American people have reacted to the Lewinski scandal is a simple psychological response to the long period between President Clinton's denial of an affair and his eventual admission of an "inappropriate relationship." In the eight months between those two speeches, most Americans had gradually become convinced that the President lied in his

initial denial. Consequently, when President Clinton admitted he had misled the public, the shock factor was absent—many people had already concluded that he wasn't telling the truth. And the constant emphasis in the news about the story eventually led many to conclude that our elected officials were obsessed with the scandal. Though it has been suggested that the reluctance to condemn Mr. Clinton's actions is indicative of a nation that has lost its moral compass, it could be that it also points to a sense of morality that is repulsed by publicly discussing private matters.

Exit polls indicate that over half of all voters did not consider President Clinton an issue in the election. Some candidates and issues which he supported won, and some lost. It seems what was most significant was that Republicans in this session of Congress failed to establish an agenda of their own that emphasized traditional conservatism. As we will see in the next section, it is evident that voters did not reject the social and moral concerns of Christians, but rather the failure of some Republicans to make a principled stand on the issues.

Major Victories for Christian Conservatives

The mainstream press has attempted to portray the lack-luster performance of Republicans at the national level as a major blow to the religious right, yet exit polls indicate that the major difference this year was that it was the religious right itself that shifted its allegiance away from the Republican Party. The clear message is that Republicans cannot expect religious conservatives to slavishly vote Republican every time. Voters seem much more willing to look at each individual candidate on his or her own merit, rather than simply following a party line. It would appear that some of its strongest supporters are attempting to send Republican Party leaders a message.

Christians and other religious conservatives who are concerned that the elections indicate a major shift away from traditional morality may be focusing too strongly on their reaction to the Clinton scandal. Whereas 20 percent of voters went to the voting booth with the clear intent of voting against Mr. Clinton, another 20 percent voted with support of the President in mind. Those two groups thus canceled each other out. The other 60 percent of voters maintained that they voted with no thought of President Clinton. And since many Democrats attempted to distance themselves from President Clinton during their campaigns, it would be a stretch to suggest that those who voted Democrat were voting for the President. And when we consider the issues which were voted on this past November, we can't help but notice that major victories were won in areas important to Christians.

Perhaps one of the most defining moments of these elections was the banning of same-sex marriage in both Hawaii and Alaska. Of course, the silence from the major media has been deafening, especially when it had been suggested just two years ago by gay activists that Hawaii would open the floodgates for same-sex marriage. Even though homosexual activists poured considerable amounts of money and energy into their campaigns, nearly 70 percent of both Alaskan and Hawaiian voters affirmed marriage as being between one man and one woman. In a related issue, Republicans had high hopes that Matt Fong would defeat liberal Senator Barbara Boxer in California, but Fong shocked many conservative supporters late in the campaign by making concessions to the gay and lesbian community. Needless to say, Fong lost, mainly due to his failure to take a principled stand.

Also, another major issue for Christians has been the emphasis on the sanctity of life. In the home state of Jack Kevorkian, Michigan voters defeated doctor-assisted suicide by a wide margin. Colorado voters also placed a limitation on abortion by requiring parental consent for teenagers seeking abortion.

Unfortunately, Colorado and Washington both refused to outlaw partial-birth abortions, although the votes were very close.

In sum, while conservatives seem to be laying all their bets on the Republican Party, and because Republicans didn't do as well as expected, there has been a tendency to say conservatism, and especially religious conservatism, was a big loser on election day. But when we look at the results of particular races, we see that only a handful of true conservatives lost at the national level, and many referendums were won. Any attempt to view the elections as an outright rejection of a conservative religious worldview cannot be supported by the facts.

Moral Judgment and the Sexual Revolution

As we have examined the November elections, we have concluded that the attitude of most Americans toward President Clinton was left out of the ballot box. President Clinton was not running for office, and the major shift in voting patterns was demonstrated by religious conservatives, who appear to have punished Republicans for failing to act like the majority in Congress. Probably the best way to gauge how Americans view the President is to recall the polls that have been taken since the Lewinski matter erupted in January of 1998.

Certainly one of the most curious aspects of this political year has been the consistently high job approval ratings the President has enjoyed, while at the same time he is considered a poor role model by a majority. The very fact that people have made a moral judgment of the President is once again a positive indication that American society is not simply concerned with pragmatism. But on the other hand, the majority of Americans seem to be willing to forgive Mr. Clinton and simply want the issue to go away. In this respect, Americans seem perfectly content to ignore the scandal as long as there is peace abroad and economic prosperity at home. Besides, it is the opinion of many that the scandal is "just about sex."

If anything, it is that small phrase which should be of concern for society, since it seems to imply that sexuality is of little importance. A biblical worldview is entirely opposed to such a notion.

According to Genesis 2, God's desire is that one man and one woman should become "one flesh" in the act of marriage—a euphemism for sexual union. But since the beginning of time, humanity has rejected God's plan, and the consequences have been devastating. In the United States, there has been a concerted effort since the 1960's to overcome any social restrictions against sex outside of marriage, all in the name of personal freedom. But in fact, many of the social pathologies in this country can be traced to a distorted view of sexuality. When men and women reject the sacredness of sexuality and view sex as simply recreational, the natural results are obvious: unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, divorce, single-motherhood, and poverty. Not so obvious is another related issue. When young men grow up without fathers, they typically learn conceptions of manhood from other youth, rather than learning from their fathers. Violent gangs are often the only families that some young men ever identify with. Thus, to speak of sexuality as though it is of little import is a tragic mistake.

Of course, because the sexual revolution has had such a powerful grip on society, it is easy to see why so many are able to separate President Clinton's personal life from his public duties. When any society loosens its attitude toward a particular activity, the members of that society will feel less ashamed for engaging in that activity. As a consequence, those who engage in that activity will be much less likely to condemn anyone who does the same thing, since to do so would necessarily be a condemnation of themselves. More than likely, the willingness for many to simply ignore the Lewinski matter is a residue of a casual view of sexuality. However, the American people must remember that the issue before them is

not only a sexual scandal, but a question of the rule of law. That issue has broader implications for us all.

The Case for the Common Good

As we have been considering the recent national elections and the surprising results, we have considered the possible connection between the results and the public's reaction to President Clinton and the Lewinski scandal. We have noted that exit polls indicate that candidates were typically judged on their own merits. Thus, overall results cannot be said to reflect favorably or negatively on Mr. Clinton. We also noted that the sexual revolution has lessened the tendency of Americans to judge anyone for sexual indiscretions. But, what must now be emphasized is that the President's impeachment hearings are based on allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice. That many Americans are willing to dismiss such an offense should be of concern to all of us.

Perhaps the first thing that should be acknowledged by all is that President Clinton is well-liked by many Americans. Consequently, this case is similar to the O.J. Simpson trial, where a well-known and well-liked celebrity won a trial of public opinion. In this situation, millions of Americans are sympathetic toward the President. Unfortunately, many Americans have construed their affection for the President as being admissible as evidence in a court of law. In reality, juries are not simply allowed to determine a person's fate by majority rule. And contrary to what has been stated recently by media friends of President Clinton such as Geraldo Rivera, perjury is a criminal offense. To simply ignore its possibility in this case would be devastating for our legal system.

When we consider that this country's government is founded on an intricate system of checks and balances, we must ultimately recognize that the rule of law is essential to a just society. When people are discriminated against, or granted special

favours in the legal system, the result is injustice. President Clinton himself recognizes this, as he is the top law enforcement officer in the land. In addition, the following statement is found in the Justice Department's manual for federal prosecutors: "Because false declarations affect the integrity of the judicial fact-finding process, all offenders should be vigorously prosecuted."

Unfortunately, contemporary society tends to denigrate public service, and place a premium on the comforts of private and family life. Consequently, many people are willing to ignore the legal case against President Clinton since they assume it does not directly concern them. But, as Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us over 150 years ago in his great work *Democracy in America*, one of the dangers of democracy is that it can flatten people's personalities, making them "creatures of mass opinion and enslaving them to the drive for material security, comfort and equality." But if the American people are willing to forfeit the integrity of the law out of a desire for convenience or prosperity, it demonstrates not so much the lack of a moral compass as it indicates that many Americans no longer recognize the concept of the common good.

When a government becomes too powerful, de Toqueville warns, its citizens are willing to sacrifice freedom for comfort. Should contemporary society assume that President Clinton should not have to be held accountable for perjury, it would establish a legal precedent that would call into question the rule of law in our society. To that extent our elected congressional leaders must remember that their first responsibility is to the laws which they as a body have sworn to defend. While the spectacle of impeachment hearings is a sad prospect, even more tragic would be the cynicism that would be the result of ignoring this case for reasons of political expediency.

Millennial Cautions

Over twenty years ago, as a new Christian, I found myself mesmerized by Christian speakers and books that predicted future social and political events with newspaper-like details. I relished sharing those details with less biblically informed friends. They were amazed and sometimes frightened by what I thought the Bible was predicting about tomorrow's events. But as the years have progressed, I now wonder if that was an appropriate way to introduce my friends to Christianity. Many of the predictions that I shared have not come true. Did I make the claims of Christ more believable by focusing on prophecy or did I place roadblocks in the path of some, actually making their understanding of the gospel more difficult?

People seem to have an innate desire to know the future. Perhaps it is part of our need to be in control, see what's coming, and have time to prepare for it. As Charles Kettering once wrote, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there." Some people's lives are changed forever by those who claim to know the future. Hitler claimed that he and his followers were establishing a reign that would last a thousand years. A few short years after first making those claims, his nation, and much of the world, lay in ruins as a result of his violent vision. Recent examples of the dangers of unbalanced fascination with prophecy include the odd Heaven's Gate cult, with their predictions of UFOs, death, and resurrection, and the Waco, Texas, sect led by David Koresh. Both groups, led by self-appointed "visionaries," influenced people in dramatically harmful ways.

On the other hand, a single person with vision can be a

powerful force for positive change. William Wilberforce, after converting to evangelical Christianity in 1784, had a life-long desire to see an end to the international slave trade and of slavery itself in England and its colonies. His tenacity and vision had the remarkable impact of rallying both the British people and the powerful British navy toward achieving his goals. Another example of the positive impact that one person with vision can have is seen in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. His prophetic "I have a Dream" speech on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on many people in America and the world regarding racial prejudice. It seems clear that an individual with an exceptionally strong vision for the future can have a great impact on it.

Sharing the truth of Christ's return can no doubt have a positive impact on people. Our Lord's return is a reality that all Christians claim as part of the hope mentioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Unfortunately, I have encountered Christians who spend too much time trying to determine when Christ will return. In fact, some prophecy experts have fallen into the trap of the early heretic Montanus who claimed prophetic powers and claimed to know the time of our Lord's return even though Jesus himself said that no one knows when He will return but the Father (Matt. 24:36).[\(1\)](#)

As we approach the year 2000, prophets and prophecies are expected to multiply in both the secular world and the Church. In this discussion, I will look at examples of prophecy experts who claimed to know more than they could deliver. My purpose is not to endorse one end-times system over another. However, my hope is that Christians will be discouraged from claiming knowledge they do not possess and encouraged to keep their focus on the gospel message rather than on highly questionable prophetic schemes.

Christ's Return and the Church

A quick scan of the Internet reveals the popularity of prophetic claims. Along with sites on biblical prophecy, there are pages detailing the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the famous "sleeping prophet," and the fairly well-known Nostradamus. But there are many lesser-known prophetic sources as well, like one site called *Millennium Matters*. It has 583 pages of information on something called the "Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension," which predicts the awakening of a planetary entity on the earth in the near future. We might make fun of these prophecies, but imagine how Christians appear to others when we make false predictions about the return of Christ.

Attempting to predict the future is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 18; Acts 16) with warnings against divination and interpreting omens. Yet history has recorded the tendency of Christians to predict Christ's coming in every generation. Tertullian, a follower of Montanus in the second century, supported the idea of a near return when he wrote, "What terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! What pestilences, famines . . . and quakings of the earth has history recorded!" [\(2\)](#) He felt that these evidences alone were enough to indicate Christ's return. Novation in the third century and Donatus in the fourth, were both branded as heretics, but gathered a large number of followers by proclaiming the immanent return of Christ. Later, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory was sure that the end of the world was near. He wrote,

Of all the signs described by our Lord as presaging the end of the world, some we see already accomplished... For we now see that nation arises against nation and that they press and weigh upon the land in our own times as never before in the annals of the past. Earthquakes overwhelm countless cities, as we often hear from other parts of the world. Pestilence we endure without interruption. It is true that we do not behold

signs in the sun and moon and stars but that these are not far off we may infer from the changes of the atmosphere. [\(4\)](#)

Pope Gregory's words sound quite contemporary, and remarkably similar to some current thinking on prophecy.

What I am warning against is not the preaching of Christ's return. Virtually all Christians believe that He will return physically and that a final judgment will follow. How then, do we respond to this truth? Christ uses the parables of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) to teach His followers to be constantly ready for His return. We are to be ambassadors for Christ and the Kingdom of God, sharing the message of reconciliation that is found only in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

One potentially damaging aspect of some prophecy teaching is the tendency to look for and find conspiracies that foretell Christ's return. Whether it be a renewed Roman Empire or a one-world government, Christians seem to relish a world of secret connections and commitments. We already know that the world system is hostile to the gospel, Jesus told us as much and warned of persecution. When we tend to see people through the lens of grand conspiracies, the natural response is to fight the conspiracy rather than share the gospel with the individual. The New Testament calls us to build God's Kingdom one heart at a time. We accomplish this not with legal or political power, but by sharing the good news revealed by God in a culturally relevant way.

The First Millennium

Predictions for the end of the world were prolific at the close of the first millennium after Christ. Now we will look at some of these predictions and consider their impact on the Church.

In A.D. 950 Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote a "Treatise on the

Antichrist" which was a response to a number of mid-century crises that had provoked widespread alarm and fear of an end-time apocalypse.[\(5\)](#) Five years later, Abbo of Fleury heard a preacher in Paris who announced that the Antichrist would be unleashed in the year 1000 and that the Last Judgment would soon follow.[\(6\)](#) At about the same time a panic occurred in the German army of Emperor Otto I because of a solar eclipse that the soldiers mistook as a sign of the end of the world.[\(7\)](#) And when the last Carolingian dynasty fell with the death of King Louis V in 987, many saw this event as a precursor to the arrival of the Antichrist. King Otto II of Germany had Charlemagne's body exhumed on Pentecost in the year 1000 supposedly in order to forestall the apocalypse. Both Halley's comet in A.D. 989 and a super nova in A.D. 1006 were interpreted as signs of the end. About the same time, the Moslem caliph, Al Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem prompting apocalyptic fear in the west as well as violent anti-Jewish outbursts.[\(8\)](#)

The Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore (ca. A.D. 1135 1202) stands out as a key figure in medieval apocalypticism. On Easter Sunday in 1183 he was inspired to write his massive Exposition on Revelation. Later near the end of his life, he summarized his prophetic knowledge in the Book of Figures. His writings influenced a wide range of medieval events. The Franciscan order was founded on the basis that they would be the spiritual elite described in Joachim's "Age of the Spirit," a future time when God would send revelation directly to believers. Using Joachim's hints, writers concluded that the "Age of Grace" would end and the "Age of the Spirit" would begin in A.D. 1260. This prophecy, mixed with German social unrest, created a myth surrounding Frederick II. Having ruled from 1220 to 1250, many believed that Frederick was the "Emperor of the Last Days" who would usher in the new Millennium.[\(9\)](#) The myth gained force when Frederick seized Jerusalem in 1229. When he died in 1250, a new myth started that Frederick would return from the dead. Two pseudo-

Fredericks were burned at the stake by his successor to the throne. The Book of a Hundred Chapters stated that the returned Frederick would lead a fight against corruption in the state and the church, and that he will instruct his followers to “Go on hitting them” (referring to the Pope and his students) and to “Kill every one of them!” [\(10\)](#)

The Taborites, founded in A.D. 1415, also looked back to Joachim for their prophetic beliefs. They believed that once their persecutors were defeated, Christ would return and rule the world from Mount Tabor, a mountain they had renamed south of Prague. Their communal activities eventually turned bloody, prompted by tracts with lines like, “Accursed be the man who withholds his sword from shedding the blood of the enemies of Christ.” [\(11\)](#) After a crushing defeat at the hands of the German army, the group quickly disbanded.

Although all of these prophecies were misguided, it would be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of the individuals. However, the events surrounding the end of the first millennium should temper our desire to make predictions about the coming new millennium. Next, we will look at more recent predictions that have been just as wrong.

Recent Predictions

People want to know the future and are eager to follow those who claim to predict it. When a Jehovah’s Witness knocks on your door, prophecy is used as a hook to gain entrance. A recent best-selling book *The Bible Code* claims to have uncovered a hidden code in the Old Testament that predicts many modern-day events as well as a nuclear holocaust in the year 2000 or 2006. Many New Age books are sold on the claim that channelers have access to future events when connected to those on another spiritual plane. Because of the emotional power of prophecy, the temptation for Christians to make dramatic claims about future events is great. Discernment and care must be used so that the integrity of the gospel message

is not compromised. There is no doubt that Scripture teaches a Second Coming of Christ and that a final judgment will follow. However, there is considerable disagreement among Bible-believing Christians regarding the signs that foretell these events and our ability to predict when Christ will return.

One of the favorite past-times of date setters is to attempt to identify the Antichrist, a powerful figure who will appear immediately prior to Christ's return. This guessing game has a long tradition, going back to the time right after Jesus' death. The early church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine all believed that this person would be present immediately prior to Christ's return. During the Middle Ages, some churchmen identified the Antichrist as a Moslem, such as Saladin, but others pointed to a Jew, and some even pointed to the Pope. During the American Revolution it was popular to cast King George III in the role of Antichrist, but the Earl of Bute and British general John Burgoyne also got nominations.

Other familiar names to be included in this long list of suspected Antichrists are Napoleon, the British Parliament, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Since World War II, the Pope still makes the list as does Jewish leader Moshe Dayan, the assassinated Egyptian leader Anwar el-Sadat, Spain's King Juan Carlos, and Korean cult leader Sun Myung Moon. For some, Mikhail Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein are naturals for the job.

The mark of the Beast, the number 666, has been used in very creative ways to support many different Antichrist theories. Although many conservative theologians have seen the number 666 from Revelation 13 as symbolic of all that is evil and a blasphemous parody of the perfection that the Bible attributes to the number 7, others attempt to use the number to identify an individual.[\(12\)](#) The advent of the computer has caused some to see it as the Beast. One writer noted that if the letter "A"=6 and "B"=12 and "C"=18, and so on, the word computer adds

up to 666. The same writer also observed that the words "New York" added up to 666.[\(13\)](#) Some pointed to John Kennedy because he had received 666 votes for the vice-presidency in 1956.[\(14\)](#) Others pointed to Henry Kissinger because his name in Hebrew added up to 111 or 666 divided by 6.[\(15\)](#) Even Ronald Reagan was considered because his first, middle, and last names all had six letters.[\(16\)](#)

The striking number of attempts to identify the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666 should at least give us a sense of humility before adding another name to the list. Perhaps we should follow the example of Irenaus in the second century. Seeing the many efforts to identify the Antichrist in his day, he cautioned against the practice and believed that the name was deliberately concealed until it would be obvious in the day of the Antichrist's arrival.

The U.S. in Prophecy

As the year 2000 gets closer, prophets and their prophecies will explode in number. A popular topic for prophecy experts is the future of the United States. Although prophecy expert John Walvoord has written, "No specific mention of the United States or any other country in North America or South America can be found in the Bible,"[\(17\)](#) this has not, and probably will not, stop others from seeing detailed references to the U.S. and its future in Scripture.

The depiction of the United States in end-times scenarios has varied over the years. There is a long tradition of seeing the U.S. as the New Israel. Near the end of his life, Christopher Columbus wrote, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which He spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it."[\(18\)](#) In 1653 the New England historian Edward Johnson wrote that the U.S. "is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth," a theme that Jonathan Edwards picked up nearly a hundred years later.[\(19\)](#)

This notion that the colonies held a special place in God's redemption plan continued to spread as the colonies grew. By the time of the War for Independence, this conception changed from a primarily religious or spiritual role to a civic one as well. In 1808 Elias Smith, a New England evangelist, argued that the Great Awakening in America, as well as the American and French revolutions, had set the foundation for the end-time age described in the Bible.[\(20\)](#) In his book *White Jacket* in 1850, Herman Melville writes, "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls."[\(20\)](#)

This ardent belief in America's millennial role reached its peak during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" all contained allusions to Scripture and apocalyptic themes. Although this trend did not disappear, the twentieth century found Christian thinkers beginning to see the U.S. in another light. In 1937 Arno Gaebelein wrote that the U.S. had been overrun by the powers of darkness[\(21\)](#) and in 1949 Wilbur Smith saw American society described in the list of end time evils of 2 Timothy.[\(22\)](#) More and more, America was being identified with Babylon rather than with the New Israel.

Since the 1960s, prophecy writers have pointed out America's long list of moral failures as evidence that God will soon focus His wrath on us. Many of them hold that the increase in abortion, homosexuality, godless education, divorce, crime, and pornography in our nation will soon seal our fate and lead to our downfall as a nation.

This may be the case, but the many different interpretations of America's future role in God's end-times plan should cause a great deal of humility and prudence concerning our own ability to know what God has in mind for this nation. Once one

goes beyond the general principal that God blesses those who conform to His moral guidelines, we are on shaky ground. Perhaps we would be far better off seeking a pure heart rather than trying to discern what role America will play in the millennium or who the Antichrist might be. Jesus is coming again. Worrying about the details or the exact time of His return is pointless if it does not turn us toward a holy life. As Jesus said, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt. 6:27).

Notes

1. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Harvard University, 1992), p. 46.
2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. <http://www.mille.org/1000-dos.htm>, p.1.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
9. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 53.
10. Ibid., p. 54.
11. Ibid., p. 55.
12. Alan F. Johnson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), p. 535.
13. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 283.
14. Ibid., p. 275.
15. Ibid., p. 276.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 247.
18. Ibid., p. 225.
19. Ibid., p. 226.
20. Ibid., p. 227.
21. Ibid., p. 228.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a politically correct attempt to over-correct cultural bias by elevating all subcultures to equal status.



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

What is Multiculturalism?

A few years ago the campus newspaper of a major university published an essay written by two professors titled *The Statement of the Black Faculty Caucus*.^{1} The purpose of the essay was to define how the University might become a truly multicultural institution. It spoke of empowerment, authority, Western culture, and transformation. The objective of the Black Faculty Caucus was to create a critical mass of empowered “minority people” at all levels of the university system. The essay argued that “Euro-Americans teaching the materials of people of color cannot make the University multicultural because multiculturalism demands empowered people of color as well as empowered areas of knowledge.”^{2} At the end of their essay the authors wrote, “What we are talking about here is no less than transforming the University into a center of multicultural learning: anything less continues a system of education that ultimately reproduces racism and racists.”^{3}

Racial reconciliation should be a top priority for every Christian, of any race or cultural background. But will this demand for a “multicultural center of learning” produce a less prejudiced society? Multiculturalists insist on greater sensitivity towards, and increased inclusion of, racial minorities and women in society. Christians should endorse both of these goals. But many advocating multiculturalism go beyond these demands for sensitivity and inclusion; here is where Christians must be careful.

One of the difficulties of accommodating multiculturalists is that defining a multicultural society, curriculum, or institution seems to be determined by one’s perspective. A commonly held view suggests that being multicultural involves tolerance towards racial and ethnic minorities, mainly in the areas of dress, language, food, religious beliefs, and other cultural manifestations. However, an influential group calling itself NAME, or the National Association for Multicultural Education, includes in its philosophy statement the following: “Xenophobia, discrimination, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are societal phenomena that are inconsistent with the principles of a democracy and lead to the counterproductive reasoning that differences are deficiencies.”[\[4\]](#) NAME is a powerful organization composed of educators from around the country, and it has considerable influence on how schools approach the issue of diversity on campus. The fundamental question that the folks at NAME need to answer is, “Is it always counterproductive to reason that some differences might be deficiencies?” In other words, isn’t it possible that some of the characteristics of specific culture groups are dangerous or morally flawed (for example, the culture of pedophilia)?

It is not uncommon for advocates of multiculturalism like NAME to begin with the assumption that truth is culturally based. It is argued that a group’s language dictates what ideas about God, human nature, and morality are permissible. While

Americans may define reality using ideas from its Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian heritage, Asian or African cultures see the world differently based on their traditions. Multiculturalists conclude that since multiple descriptions of reality exist, no one view can be true in any ultimate sense. Furthermore, since truth is a function of language, and all language is created by humans, all truth is created by humans. This view of truth and language has a spokesperson in Dr. Richard Rorty, humanities professor at the University of Virginia, who argues that truth that transcends culture is not available because “where there are no sentences there is no truth, and sentences and their respective languages are human creations.”[\[5\]](#)

Finally, if all truth is created by humans, it is all equally true. Cultural ideas or institutions, like human sacrifice or welfare systems, are equally valid if they are useful for a given group of people. In other words, we live in a universe that is blind to moral choices. We are the final judges of how we shall live.

As Christians, we believe that ideas do have consequences. While being careful not to promote one set of cultural rules over others simply because we are comfortable with them, we acknowledge that Scripture reveals to us the character and nature of God, humankind, and our need for a savior. These truths can be communicated cross-culturally in a sensitive way, regardless of the people-group involved. If we didn't believe this to be true in a universal sense, then Christianity can't be true in any real way. In other words, in order to be what it claims to be, Christianity must transcend culture in a way that many multiculturalists argue cannot occur.

Language and Sensitivity

In recent years, America has been attracting over one million immigrants annually. This has resulted in a country that is

religiously, racially, and linguistically more diverse. Conflict arises, however, over the question of how our nation's institutions should respond to this diversity. Until recently, it was argued that America was a melting pot society, that regardless of an immigrant's origin, given a generation or two, his family would be assimilated into American culture. Multiculturalists have challenged both the reality and advisability of this view.

Multiculturalists brand our culture as white, Western, male, Christian, middle-class and heterosexual. They declare that our schools have forced on students a curriculum that promotes only that perspective. The books they read, the ideas they consider, the moral and ethical standards they are taught, explicitly or implicitly, tend to be those of dead white European males. The problem, they argue, is that this leaves out the contributions of many people. People of color, women, homosexuals, and various religious traditions are ignored and thus silenced. As a result, they contend, what passes for knowledge on campus is biased. Their goal is to correct this bias.

This charge of bias is not a groundless one. Even though many feel that Western culture has been very open to outside ideas, all majorities—in any society—will tend to seek cultural dominance.

The resulting multiculturalist agenda includes three demands on American society. The first is that the white Americans become more sensitive to minorities. This demand has resulted in what is referred to as “politically correct language.” Speech codes enforcing sensitivity on college campuses have attempted to protect oppressed groups from having to endure words and ideas that might ostracize them. At the center of this issue is the individual's feelings or self-esteem. The multiculturalists argue that if a person's self-esteem is damaged, he or she cannot learn in school.

Christians ought to be the most sensitive people in society. If calling people handicapped, Black, or Indian makes them feel diminished in importance or somehow less human, we as Christians need to be empathetic and make changes in our use of language. This sensitivity should grow out of a sense of biblical humility, not for political or economic reasons.

But another question still must be answered. Will the enforced use of certain words really benefit the self-esteem and thus the learning of minority students in schools, as some have suggested? Dr. Paul Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argues that this is a far too simplistic view of human nature.^[6] Self-esteem itself cannot be tied directly to any behavior, positive or negative.

Some contend that enforcing “politically correct speech” is an attempt to redescribe our society in a manner that changes the way we think about issues. If the concepts of personal and family responsibility become labeled as hate speech towards those on welfare, an entire way of looking at the issue is forced out of the dialogue.

Unfortunately, language can also be used to legitimize behavior that Christians believe to be morally wrong. Homosexuality has progressively been referred to as a sin, then a disease, a lifestyle, and now a preference or sexual orientation. Just by re-describing this activity in new terms, an entirely different connotation is given to what homosexuality is. This has not occurred by accident.

Hebrews 12:14 tells us to make every effort to be at peace with all men. As we articulate truth, our language should lean towards gentleness and respect, for the sake of the Gospel. When we believe that every person deserves to be shown respect because we are all created in the image of God, our attitude will result in language and tone that is sensitive and gentle—not because political correctness demands it, but because out of a heart of love flow words of love.

Inclusion and Truth

A second demand being made on our schools and society is in the area of inclusiveness. Multiculturalists contend that marginalized people need to be brought into the curriculum and the marketplace of ideas on campus. No group should ever have to feel left out. One example is the recent set of standards offered by UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools. As originally offered, the standards greatly increased the voice of both minorities and women in the telling of our nation's history. However, many charge that they denigrated or ignored the contributions of white Americans in order to be inclusive. In fact, some complained that the overall picture of America produced by the standards was of an oppressive, WASPish empire. Even the U.S. Senate denounced the proposed standards by a vote of 99 to 1. One Senator voted against the resolution because it wasn't strong enough.

The standards declared that the U.S. is not a Western-based nation, but the result of three cultures. These cultures—Native American, African-American and European—are not seen as moral equals. In fact, the European contribution was one of oppression, injustice, gender bias and rape of the natural world. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, responded to the standards by saying that “No other nation in the world teaches a national history that leaves its children feeling negative about their own country—this would be the first.”[\[7\]](#)

In fact, U.S. history textbooks have been moving toward inclusion for some time. In order to make up for the neglect of women and people of color in past texts, some historians and publishers have gone a bit overboard in their attempts at finding the right balance. In one text, *The American Nation*, of the 13 religious leaders mentioned in short biographies, only two are non-Hispanic white males—Brigham Young and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[\[8\]](#) Often women and minorities are injected into

the text in odd ways. In this book, Senator Margaret Chase Smith is cited for challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy. While she was an early critic of McCarthy, she had little to do with his eventual political demise. Another example is Native American chief George Crum, noted for making the first potato chips in 1853.

The writing of history is a delicate task, and is probably impossible to accomplish without bias. But as Christians, we would prefer that truth—what really happened—at least be the goal, rather than political or racial propaganda, even if this goal will never be perfectly accomplished. This notion of truth demands that students be taught as much U.S. history as feasible. To leave out the experience of Native Americans, African-Americans or women would be a tremendous failure. But writing our entire history from their perspective is unfair as well. One answer to this problem is to have students read more primary historical documents and depend less on history textbooks. Unfortunately, multiculturalists see all texts as primarily political. They argue that only one view prevails: either the empowered majority's or the oppressed minority's. This belief that all knowledge is political results in turning schools into battlegrounds where representatives from every group, from Hispanics to gay rights activists, go over the curriculum with a magnifying glass, looking for the proper amount of inclusion or any derogatory remarks made about their group.

Tolerance as a Worldview

Many multiculturalists insist that we embrace multiculturalism in our schools not just in the way we teach, but in the way we think. Multiculturalists have specific ideas about the notion of truth; paramount is the belief that no truth transcends culture, that no idea or moral concept might be true for every cultural group or every human being. As a result, multiculturalists demand that we give up our beliefs in moral

absolutes and become moral relativists.

This worldview model has been the litmus test for college professors on many campuses for quite some time, particularly in the humanities. Evidently, in some programs it is now being applied to college students as well. In 1992, St. Cloud (Minn.) State University made it known that if students were to be accepted, those who desired to enter the social work program must relinquish specific notions of moral truth. While acknowledging that many students come from religious backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, these very students were required to go beyond "hating the sin and loving the sinner." Students who had predetermined negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians were told to look elsewhere for a major. In other words, one must, at the level of faith commitment, find no moral aversion to homosexuality in order to be admitted to this program. This removes a majority of our population from consideration right off the bat.

Part of the problem with multiculturalism is that it allows for a broad definition of cultural groups. There is both a gay culture and a feminist culture in America. In fact, any group can identify itself as a marginalized culture group. The homeless become a cultural group, as do single mothers on welfare. Should their perspectives get equal treatment in our schools? Are their moral values as valid as all others? The problem is that to be considered multiculturally sensitive, one must be able to place oneself into the perspective of the oppressed group completely, at the metaphysical level, not just to sympathize or even empathize with them. This means that one must be willing to compromise faith-based beliefs about God, human nature, and reality itself. For instance, if the gay community, being an oppressed minority group, believes that being homosexual is natural and every bit as normal as heterosexual relationships, Christians should ignore what they believe to be revealed truth about homosexuality's sinfulness.

Christians are called to have mercy and compassion on the poor and less fortunate, but not at the expense of recognizing that some lifestyles result in the impoverishment of people regardless of their race or cultural heritage. What is being asked of Christians is that we give up our view of a universe governed by a moral God who has established a moral universe, and replace it with a morally relativistic one. Tolerance becomes the only absolute. To be exclusive about truth, or to argue that some action might be morally wrong for all people all the time, violates this new absolute of tolerance.

Ultimately, this current enforcement of tolerance is really a thinly veiled pursuit of power. The only way certain groups, such as homosexual activists or the more radical feminists, can get recognition and the ability to spread their views, is by establishing tolerance as an absolute. Eventually, they win affirmative action concessions from universities and public schools, which enforces their viewpoint. Recently, the state of Massachusetts passed legislation recognizing the difficulties of gay elementary and secondary students, forcing all public school teachers to be educated and sensitized to their plight. This recognition and re-education of teachers further legitimizes and enhances the power of the gay rights movement.

Without losing sight of our calling to reach out and minister to people caught in lifestyles and cultures that vaunt themselves against the knowledge and standards of God, we cannot become moral relativists in the process.

Justice and Truth

While multiculturalists occasionally refer to justice, it cannot be the foundation of their movement. This is for the simple reason that justice is not possible without truth. In order to claim that someone's actions or words are unjust, one must assume that a moral order really does exist, a moral order that would be true for all cultures and at all times.

Injustice implies that justice exists, justice implies that moral laws exist, and moral laws imply that a lawgiver exists.

One college professor, explaining his plan for a liberal ironist utopia, says that a liberal is someone who thinks that being cruel is the worst thing that one can do. He argues that this moral standard can be used to create a utopia on earth. But he admits, being a good moral relativist, that he cannot give any non-circular arguments for why being cruel is the worst thing one can do. He is inventing a moral law, but admitting that its foundation lies only in his preference for that law.

Even if we accept his moral standard as useful, it leaves us with many questions. The first is, what does it mean to be cruel? Is it cruel to encourage people in their gay lifestyle given the short life span of male homosexuals, even without AIDS?[\[9\]](#) If pain is part of our definition of cruelty, should all operations be banned because even if successful, pain might result? How can he know that being cruel is the worst thing one can do in a morally neutral universe? Without truth, without knowledge of right and wrong, justice is impossible, as is any notion of a good life. The word "cruel" becomes an empty word.

By declaring tolerance an absolute, multiculturalists are consistent with their view of reality. They see all human cultures as morally equal because of their faith in a naturalistic world view. This view argues for a godless universe, and recognizes chance as the only possible cause for what exists. If this is true, absolute tolerance is the best we can hope for. Christians seek sensitivity and inclusion for a much better reason.

We believe that every human being was created in God's image and reflects God's glory and majesty. We were created to have dominion over God's creation as His stewards. Thus, we are to care for others because they are ultimately worthy of our care

and concern. We are not to be cruel to others because the Creator of the universe made individuals to have fellowship with Him and He cares for them. This does not discount that people are fallen and in rebellion against God. In fact, if we really care about people we will take 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 seriously. First, that God has made reconciliation with Himself possible through His Son Jesus Christ, and as verse 20 says, "...he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

True sensitivity and inclusion will not be achieved by making tolerance an absolute. They occur when we take what people believe, and the consequences of those beliefs, seriously. When you think about it, what could be crueler than failing to inform people of the Gospel of redemption through Christ, leaving them to spend eternity separated from the Creator God who loves them?

Notes

1. Berman, Paul. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (NY: Dell Publishing, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 253.
3. Ibid., 257.
4. Francis, Samuel, "The Other Face of Multiculturalism," *Chronicles*, April, 1998, p. 33.
5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 5.
6. Guinness, Os & Seel, John, ed. *No God But God*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 96.

7. Leo, John "History standards are bunk" *U.S. News & World Report* February 6, 1995, 23.

8. Ibid.

9. Dr. Paul Cameron, *Family Research* (Newsletter of the Family Research Institute, Inc.), April-June 1991.

©1998 Probe Ministries

Christians and Culture

What Should We Do with This Thing Called Culture?

What do you think of when you hear the word culture? Perhaps you refer to the arts. You may picture the way people dress, the way they eat, their language, their religion, their architecture, or a host of other perceptions. One of the most succinct definitions of culture is wide-ranging because it refers to "that which man does beyond biological necessity."^{[1](#)} Obviously such a definition indicates the importance of the term. Our lives are lived within culture. There is no escaping this thing called culture. But how is a Christian to respond?

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Christians who lived in Corinth, a very challenging culture. Where should we stand? Inside? Outside? Ignore it? Become isolated from it? Should we concern ourselves with attempting to transform it?

In 1949 a theologian named Richard Niebuhr delivered a series of lectures entitled *Christ and Culture*.^{2} Subsequently his thoughts were published and the book has become a classic. Niebuhr's text focuses on five paradigms that describe how Christians have dealt with culture. A brief survey of these paradigms can help us see ourselves, and perhaps challenge us to consider changing the way we look at the world around us.

The first paradigm, *Christ against Culture*, describes those who choose to isolate themselves from the surrounding culture. A descriptive contemporary phrase might be "the holy huddle" of Christians who dialog among themselves, but no one else. Second, the *Christ of Culture* perspective is exactly the opposite of *Christ against Culture* because it attempts to bring culture and Christianity together, regardless of their differences. Third, the *Christ above Culture* position attempts to synthesize the issues of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation. Fourth, *Christ and Culture in Paradox* refers to those who understand the tension between the Christian's responsibility to both the cultural and the spiritual realms. Fifth, *Christ the Transformer of Culture* describes those who strive "to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God."^{3}

Which of these paradigms describes your relationship with the culture in which you live? Or perhaps you have another paradigm to offer. No doubt we could engage in debate about the merits and demerits of all of them. But since we cannot do that at the moment, let us agree that we should at least give attention to our place in culture.

Christians are to observe and analyze culture and make decisions regarding our proper actions and reactions within it. A struggle is in progress and the stakes are high. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be thoughtful and informed.

Our work through Probe Ministries is dedicated to the

proposition that the Lord can use Christians as salt and light. God has called us to offer a voice in both the Christian and the non-Christian communities. Among other things, this means that we have attempted to give attention to how this can be done for the glory of God. In particular, our involvement in the non-Christian community presents a special challenge. Much prayer and study have been focused on principles that should be considered before we engage with the culture. In this article, I will focus on five of these principles that apply to ministry within the culture.

Establishing Biblical Precepts

Unless you live in a cave, you have had to deal with the culture around you. You have sensed the need to give thought to how you might glorify God as you react to your culture. Or you may have experienced times of mental and spiritual trauma as you realized the sinful nature of what you experience around you. If you choose to interact with your culture, there are certain principles to be considered.

The first of these is the need for biblical precepts. That is, our minds should be filled with God's ideas before interacting with the culture. This is an understandable and universally stated declaration among evangelical Christians. Experience tells us we need to give life to the declaration. Are we responding to our culture based on biblical precepts, or are we responding to our culture based on other sources? Are we utilizing a Christian world view as we respond to culture, or are we unwittingly utilizing a naturalistic worldview? When we discuss things as Christians, do we focus on Scripture no matter what we might be discussing? "Contemporary Christianity is all too frequently shaped by the fact that when we meet we do so in an atmosphere resembling that of a committee or caucus, where the style is political and tactical, hardly scholarly, and almost never devotional or genuinely spiritual." [\[4\]](#) Do we give serious attention "to the sacred

text as the firm and only basis on which life and decisions should be based?"[\[5\]](#) Indeed, without the "sacred text" evangelicals are left to grapple with their culture in much the same manner as those who do not claim allegiance to that text.

In order to affirm the primacy of Scripture in a cultural critique the Christian should first *read* his culture in the light of the Bible. Proper recognition of the culture is necessary before it can be addressed properly. In other words, we need a biblical "lens" through which we can see the culture. The light of God's Word needs to be focused on the questions at hand. For example, the culture tends to *secularize* life. Most of us live, work, and play in the secular sphere. But *secularism* refers to a way of life that "excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state."[\[6\]](#)

Harry Blamires, a protégé of C.S. Lewis and an astute cultural critic, offers an insightful critique of secularism. The secularist's position can be defined only in negatives. There is no life except this life in time. There is no order of being except that which we explore with our senses and our instruments. There is no condition of well-being except that of a healthy and comfortable life in time. There is no God to be worshipped, for no God created us. There is no God to propitiate, for there is no God to offend. There is no reward to be sought and no punishment to be avoided except those which derive from earthly authority. There is no law to be obeyed except those which earthly authority imposes or earthly prudence recommends.[\[7\]](#)

Obviously, Blamires' observations are the result of seeing secularism with a scriptural lens. Biblical precepts allow him to offer such a critique. His example can be an encouragement for us. May God guide us as we apply biblical precepts to evaluate our culture.

Rejecting Cultural Biases, Developing Interaction

What do you think of the culture in which you live? In particular, what do you think of the broader American culture in which your sub-culture is found? For example, are you comfortable with the adage: "America: love it or leave it?" Or do you tend to think of certain other cultures as pristine, even if you have never visited them?

I have discussed the need to assess culture through the use of biblical precepts, the first principle of cultural evaluation. The second principle is focused on what I call cultural bias. If we are to interact with cultures other than our own, and if we seek honestly to evaluate our own, we must be cautious of biases.

Carl F.H. Henry, a great theologian, apologist, and cultural critic has enumerated what he calls twenty fantasies of a secular society. One of these includes the thought that God "will protect the United States and its people from catastrophic disaster because of our commitment to freedom, generosity, and goodness." Dr. Henry writes, "For many, God is an ever-living George Washington who serves invisibly as the father of our country. This vague political theology assumes that America can never drift irrecoverably beyond divine approval, and that the nation is intrinsically exempt from severe and final divine judgment." Another fantasy is "that the American people are essentially good at heart in a world whose inhabitants are more prone to evil."[\[8\]](#) The anthropologist Charles Kraft responds to such thinking by writing that "much of the Christian populace has simply continued to assume that such features of our society as monogamy, democracy, our type of educational system, individualism, capitalism, the 'freedoms,' literacy, technological development, military supremacy, etc. are all products of our association with God and therefore can be

pointed to as indications of the superiority of our culture over all other cultures.”[\[9\]](#)

Missionaries who serve in cultures other than their own can speak to the danger of such fantasies. But we do not have to be foreign missionaries to experience the effects of cultural bias. The United States has become such a multicultural environment that Christians can and must understand the importance of rejecting cultural biases.

Interaction but not Accommodation

The third principle of cultural evaluation focuses on the need for interaction with culture, but not accommodation. There should be no fear in this if we are using biblical precepts, the first of our principles. But we need to be alert to the ways in which we can become enmeshed in the culture. In addition, we should be accountable to one another by offering warnings when we observe such entanglement.

Without cultural interaction evangelicals leave numerous important facets of contemporary cultural life without the light of truth they can offer. A cursory reading of post-Enlightenment history will demonstrate the progressive decrease of evangelical interaction and the subsequent lack of influence in strategic areas of culture. For example, American higher education has been guided by principles that leave Christian theism out of the picture.

It is crucial, though, that such interaction take place with a sense of accountability. The person who enters the culture without respect for the ideological dangers that reside there will prove to be foolish. The ideas, the sense of progress, and the pride of cultural accomplishment can lead us to give credit to man instead of God. May the Lord receive praise as He uses us to touch our culture!

A Positive Revolutionary Vision

The word *revolution* tends to have a negative connotation for most of us. A revolutionary most often is seen as someone who engenders rebellion and chaos. But a Christian's response to culture should include a positive revolutionary mindset. Christian thought and life should state things to culture that exhibit Christ's revolutionary vision for all people. A type of pluralism that tempts us to negate Christianity's claims and absolutes should not persuade Christians. Donald Bloesch speaks to this tension by juxtaposing what he calls prophetic religion and culture religion. He writes: "Our choice today is between a prophetic religion and a culture religion. The first is anchored in a holy God who infinitely transcends every cultural and religious form that testifies to Him. The second absolutizes the cultural or mythical garb in which God supposedly meets us."[\[10\]](#) Our interaction with culture must have a prophetic voice. We must speak boldly to the culture knowing that the source of our proclamation is the sovereign God.

This means that Christians should not relegate their lives to what may be called a "Christian ghetto" or "holy huddle." Too many Christians live "a split life: they are forced to use many words and images that have a private meaning for them with which they are unable or unwilling to enrich the fund of public experience."[\[11\]](#) One may have a revolutionary vision and prophetic zeal, but too often it is directed toward his "ghetto" instead of the surrounding culture. To quote an old cliché: "He is preaching to the choir."

Notice how often conversations among Christians concentrate on problems presented by the surrounding culture. For example, discussion may focus on the latest outrage in the entertainment industry, or the newest bit of intrigue in Washington, or concerns about the sex education emphasized in public schools, or controversies surrounding issues of

abortion, euthanasia, cloning, homosexuality, child abuse, or a host of other topics. Then notice if constructive suggestions are offered. Is attention given to the ways in which the Christian community might respond to such issues based on biblical precepts? Too often such a scenario does not include positive revolutionary cultural interaction.

Lesslie Newbigin, a perceptive cultural critic, offers two propositions regarding a Christian's revolutionary vision. First, Newbigin states he would not see Christians just "in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels 'religion', but rather in the public sector where God's will as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools." Second, "I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world."[\[12\]](#) Christianity is not to be privatized; it applies to all people in all places at all times.

If we choose to take Newbigin's propositions seriously, we must not be naïve about the response we will receive. At this moment in American history the public sector often is antagonistic toward a Christian voice. Thus we should not be surprised when we are rejected. Instead, if we are stating God's ideas we should rejoice, as did the early Christians when they suffered for His name (Acts 5:41). When truth rubs shoulders with untruth, friction is the result.

Glorifying God in All of Life

The words *whatever* and *all* are enormous. Can you think of something more than *whatever* or *all*? When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth he used these terms to describe how they should glorify God in their lives: "Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all

to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). Pagan Corinth certainly provided many opportunities for early Christians to learn how to respond to their culture. The same is true for Christians in our time. We live in and associate with a culture that constantly presents challenges. We are to glorify God in all we do, regardless of those challenges. "Where God is acknowledged as the Creator, man knows that the ultimate meaning of His creatures is the same as the meaning of all life: the glory of God and the service of men."[\[13\]](#) Our work within culture and our influence on it are part of what God will judge. Therefore, these works are important.

We are to remind ourselves and tell the culture that "the prophetic church witnesses to the breaking into history of a higher righteousness; it points people to a higher law."[\[14\]](#) Carl F.H. Henry emphasizes this in a passage concerning education, but the implications cover much more:

The drift of twentieth century learning can be succinctly summarized in one statement: Instead of recognizing [God] as the source and stipulator of truth and the good, contemporary thought reduces all reality to impersonal processes and events, and insists that man himself creatively imposes upon the cosmos and upon history the only values that they will ever bear.[\[15\]](#)

God is sovereign; He is the Lord of *whatever* and *all* in all of life.

Thus we must be cautious about our emphases within culture. God changes things; we are His messengers. Our involvement is important, but it must be remembered that it is transitory. As beautiful and meaningful as the works of man may be, they will not last. The theologian Karl Barth emphasized this by relating his comments to the tower of Babel: "In the building of the tower of Babel whose top is to touch heaven, the Church can have no part. The hope of the Church rests *on* God *for* men;

it does not rest *on* men, not even on religious men—and not even on the belief that men *with the help of God* will finally build that tower.”[\[16\]](#) Our hope is not found in man’s efforts. Our hope is found in God’s provision for eternity. But this does not denigrate our involvement with culture. “There is a radical difference between human culture generally, which is thoroughly secular, and that which is developed as a loving service to God.”[\[17\]](#) Utopia will never refer to this life. Since no culture “this side of the Parousia [Second Coming] can be recognized as divine we are limited to the more modest hope that life on earth may gradually be made better; or, more modestly still, gradually be made less bad.”[\[18\]](#) Christian’s response to culture should be described with such modest hopes in view.

This article has focused on five principles that can strengthen a Christian impact on culture. Fill your mind with biblical precepts; be careful that you do not respond to the surrounding culture with cultural biases; be interactive, but not accommodating; develop a positive revolutionary mindset; and glorify God in all of life.

Notes

1. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 142.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
3. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harpter & Row, 1987), 227.
4. Charles E. Kinzie, “The Absorbed Church: Our Inheritance of Conformed Christianity,” *Sojourners* 7 (July, 1978), 22.
5. Ibid.
6. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963), 58.
7. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 59-60.
8. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Countermoves In A Decadent*

Culture (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 32.

9. Charles H. Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?" *The Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977), 182.

10. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience*, 244

11. Julius Lipner, "Being One, Let Me Be Many: Facets of the Relationship Between the Gospel and Culture," *International Review of Missions* 74 (April, 1985), 162.

12. Lesslie Newbigin, "Can the West be Converted?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 11 (October, 1987), 366.

13. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1948), 157.

14. Donald Bloesch, "The Legacy of Karl Barth," *TSF Bulletin* 9 (May-June 1986), 8

15. Carl F.H. Henry, "The Crisis of Modern Learning," *Faculty Dialogue* 10 (Winter 1988), 7

16. Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 349.

17. Joseph A. Hill, "Human Culture in Biblical Perspective," *Presbyterian Journal*, 18 February 1981, 9.

18. Stephen Mayor, "Jesus Christ and the Christian Understanding of Society," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1979), 59-60.

© 1998 Probe Ministries International

The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with

their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

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

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are

timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

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

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

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

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

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that

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

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

The Advent of the Modern

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

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

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

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence

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

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build

their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

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

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for

one person and false for another.

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

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

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

something in such a way as to alter reality.

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

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

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of

truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God's existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

Bibliography

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

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

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

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Homosexual Theology: A Biblically Sound View

Kerby Anderson helps understand the complete biblical perspective on homosexuality. As Christians, Kerby helps us understand the biblical truth and how to apply it with compassion in our dealings with those around us.

The Sin of Sodom—Genesis 19

Does the Bible condemn homosexuality? For centuries the answer to that question seemed obvious, but in the last few decades pro- homosexual commentators have tried to reinterpret the relevant biblical passages. In this discussion we will take a look at their exegesis.

The first reference to homosexuality in the Bible is found in Genesis 19. In this passage, Lot entertains two angels who come to the city to investigate its sins. Before they go to bed, all the men (from every part of the city of Sodom) surround the house and order him to bring out the men so that “we may know them.” Historically commentators have always assumed that the Hebrew word for “know” meant that the men of the city wanted to have sex with the visitors.

More recently, proponents of homosexuality argue that biblical commentators misunderstand the story of Sodom. They argue that the men of the city merely wanted to meet these visitors. Either they were anxious to extend Middle-eastern hospitality or they wanted to interrogate the men and make sure they weren't spies. In either case, they argue, the passage has nothing to do with homosexuality. The sin of Sodom is not homosexuality, they say, but inhospitality.

One of the keys to understanding this passage is the proper translation of the Hebrew word for "know." Pro-homosexuality commentators point out that this word can also mean "to get acquainted with" as well as mean "to have intercourse with." In fact, the word appears over 943 times in the Old Testament, and only 12 times does it mean "to have intercourse with." Therefore, they conclude that the sin of Sodom had nothing to do with homosexuality.

The problem with the argument is context. Statistics is not the same as exegesis. Word count alone should not be the sole criterion for the meaning of a word. And even if a statistical count should be used, the argument backfires. Of the 12 times the word "to know" is used in the book of Genesis, in 10 of those 12 it means "to have intercourse with."

Second, the context does not warrant the interpretation that the men only wanted to get acquainted with the strangers. Notice that Lot decides to offer his two daughters instead. In reading the passage, one can sense Lot's panic as he foolishly offers his virgin daughters to the crowd instead of the foreigners. This is not the action of a man responding to the crowd's request "to become acquainted with" the men.

Notice that Lot describes his daughters as women who "have not known" a man. Obviously this implies sexual intercourse and does not mean "to be acquainted with." It is unlikely that the first use of the word "to know" differs from the second use of the word. Both times the word "to know" should be translated

“to have intercourse with.” This is the only consistent translation for the passage.

Finally, Jude 7 provides a commentary on Genesis 19. The New Testament reference states that the sin of Sodom involved gross immorality and going after strange flesh. The phrase “strange flesh” could imply homosexuality or bestiality and provides further evidence that the sin of Sodom was not inhospitality but homosexuality.

Contrary to what pro-homosexual commentators say, Genesis 19 is a clear condemnation of homosexuality. Next we will look at another set of Old Testament passages dealing with the issue of homosexuality.

Mosaic Law—Leviticus 18, 20

Now we will look at the Mosaic Law. Two passages in Leviticus call homosexuality an abomination. Leviticus 18:22 says, “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” Leviticus 20:13 says, “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.” The word for “abomination” is used five times in Leviticus 18 and is a strong term of disapproval, implying that something is abhorrent to God. Biblical commentators see these verses as an expansion of the seventh commandment. Though not an exhaustive list of sexual sins, they are representative of the common sinful practices of nations surrounding Israel.

Pro-homosexual commentators have more difficulty dealing with these relatively simple passages of Scripture, but usually offer one of two responses. Some argue that these verses appear in the Holiness code of the Leviticus and only applies to the priests and ritual purity. Therefore, according to this perspective, these are religious prohibitions, not moral prohibitions. Others argue that these prohibitions were merely for the Old Testament theocracy and are not relevant today.

They suggest that if Christians wanted to be consistent with the Old Testament law code in Leviticus, they should avoid eating rare steak, wearing mixed fabrics, and having marital intercourse during the menstrual period.

First, do these passages merely apply to ritual purity rather than moral purity? Part of the problem comes from making the two issues distinct. The priests were to model moral behavior within their ceremonial rituals. Moral purity and ritual purity cannot be separated, especially when discussing the issue of human sexuality. To hold to this rigid distinction would imply that such sins as adultery were not immoral (consider Lev. 18:20) or that bestiality was morally acceptable (notice Lev. 18:23). The second argument concerns the relevance of the law today. Few Christians today keep kosher kitchens or balk at wearing clothes interwoven with more than one fabric. They believe that those Old Testament laws do not pertain to them. In a similar way pro-homosexual commentators argue that the Old Testament admonitions against homosexuality are no longer relevant today. A practical problem with this argument is that more than just homosexuality would have to be deemed morally acceptable. The logical extension of this argument would also have to make bestiality and incest morally acceptable since prohibitions to these two sins surround the prohibition against homosexuality. If the Mosaic law is irrelevant to homosexuality, then it is also irrelevant to having sex with animals or having sex with children.

More to the point, to say that the Mosaic law has ended is not to say that God has no laws or moral codes for mankind. Even though the ceremonial law has passed, the moral law remains. The New Testament speaks of the "law of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:2) and the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). One cannot say that something that was sin under the Law is not sin under grace. Ceremonial laws concerning diet or wearing mixed fabrics no longer apply, but moral laws (especially those rooted in God's

creation order for human sexuality) continue. Moreover, these prohibitions against homosexuality can also be found in the New Testament as we will see next as we consider other passages reinterpreted by pro-homosexual commentators.

New Testament Passages

In our examination of the Old Testament teachings regarding homosexuality, we found that Genesis 19 teaches that the men of Sodom were seeking the strangers in order to have sex with them, not merely asking to meet these men or to extend Middle Eastern hospitality to them. We also discovered that certain passages in Leviticus clearly condemn homosexuality and are relevant today. These prohibitions were not just for the Old Testament theocracy, but were moral principles binding on human behavior and conduct today.

At this point we will consider some of the New Testament passages dealing with homosexuality. Three key New Testament passages concerning homosexuality are: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Of the three, the most significant is Romans 1 because it deals with homosexuality within the larger cultural context.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Here the Apostle Paul sets the Gentile world's guilt before a holy God and focuses on the arrogance and lust of the Hellenistic world. He says they have turned away from a true worship of God so that "God gave them over to shameful lusts." Rather than follow God's instruction in their lives, they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18) and follow

passions that dishonor God.

Another New Testament passage dealing with homosexuality is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." Pro-homosexual commentators make use of the "abuse" argument and point out that Paul is only singling out homosexual offenders. In other words, they argue that the Apostle Paul is condemning homosexual abuse rather than responsible homosexual behavior. In essence, these commentators are suggesting that Paul is calling for temperance rather than abstinence. While this could be a reasonable interpretation for drinking wine (don't be a drunkard), it hardly applies to other sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6 or 1 Timothy 1. Is Paul calling for responsible adultery or responsible prostitution? Is there such a thing as moral theft and swindling? Obviously the argument breaks down. Scripture never condones sex outside of marriage (premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexual sex). God created man and woman for the institution of marriage (Gen. 2:24). Homosexuality is a violation of the creation order, and God clearly condemns it as unnatural and specifically against His ordained order. As we have seen in the discussion thus far, there are passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament which condemn homosexuality.

"God Made Me Gay," Part 1

At this point in our discussion, we need to consider the claim made by some homosexuals that, "God made me gay." Is this true? Is there a biological basis to homosexuality? For the remainder of this essay, we will consider the evidence usually cited. Simon LeVay (a neuroscientist at the Salk Institute) has argued that homosexuals and heterosexuals have notable

differences in the structure of their brains. In 1991, he studied 41 cadavers and found that a specific portion of the hypothalamus (the area that governs sexual activity) was consistently smaller in homosexuals than in heterosexuals. He therefore argued that there is a distinct physiological component to sexual orientation. There are numerous problems with the study. First, there was considerable range in the size of the hypothalamic region. In a few homosexual men, this region was the same size as that of the heterosexuals, and in a few heterosexuals this region was as small as that of a homosexual.

Second is the chicken and egg problem. When there is a difference in brain structure, is the difference the *result* of sexual orientation or is it the *cause* of sexual orientation? Researchers, for example, have found that when people who become blind begin to learn Braille, the area of the brain controlling the reading finger actually grows larger. Third, Simon LeVay later had to admit that he didn't know the sexual orientation of some of the cadavers in the study. He acknowledged that he wasn't sure if the heterosexual males in the study were actually heterosexual. Since some of those he identified as "heterosexual" died of AIDS, critics raised doubts about the accuracy of his study.

In December 1991, Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard published a study of homosexuality in twins. They surveyed homosexual men about their brothers and found statistics they believed proved that sexual orientation is biological. Of the homosexuals who had identical twin brothers, 52 percent of those twins were also homosexual, 22 percent of those who had fraternal twins said that their twin was gay, and only 11 percent of those who had an adopted sibling said their adopted brothers were also homosexual. They attributed the differences in those percentages to the differences in genetic material shared.

Though this study has also been touted as proving a genetic

basis to homosexuality, there are significant problems. First, the theory is not new. It was first proposed in 1952. Since that time, three other separate research studies come to very different conclusions. Therefore, the conclusions of the Bailey-Pillard study should be considered in the light of other contrary studies. Second, most published reports did not mention that only 9 percent of the non-twin brothers of homosexuals were homosexuals. Fraternal twins share no more genetic material than non-twin brothers, yet homosexuals are more than twice as likely to share their sexual orientation with a fraternal twin than with a non-twin brother. Whatever the reason, the answer cannot be genetic.

Third, why aren't nearly all identical twin brothers of homosexuals also homosexual? In other words, if biology is determinative, why are nearly half the identical twins not homosexual? Dr. Bailey admitted that there "must be something in the environment to yield the discordant twins." And that is precisely the point; there is something (perhaps everything) in the environment to explain sexual orientation. These are two studies usually cited as evidence of a biological basis for homosexuality. Next we will consider a third study often cited to prove the claim that "God made me gay."

"God Made Me Gay," Part 2

Now let's look at another study often cited as proof of this claim. This study is often called the "gay gene" study. In 1993, a team of researchers led by Dr. Dean Hamer announced "preliminary" findings from research into the connection between homosexuality and genetic inheritance. In a sample of 76 homosexual males, the researchers found a statistically higher incidence of homosexuality in their male relatives (brothers, uncles) on their mother's side of the family. This suggested a possible inherited link through the X chromosome. A follow-up study of 40 pairs of homosexual brothers found that 33 shared a variation in a small section of the X

chromosome. Although this study was promoted by the press as evidence of the discovery of a gay gene, some of the same concerns raised with the previous two studies apply here. First, the findings involve a limited sample size and are therefore sketchy. Even the researchers acknowledged that these were “preliminary” findings. In addition to the sample size being small, there was no control testing done for heterosexual brothers. Another major issue raised by critics of the study concerned the lack of sufficient research done on the social histories of the families involved.

Second, similarity does not prove cause. Just because 33 pairs of homosexual brothers share a genetic variation doesn't mean that variation causes homosexuality. And what about the other 7 pairs that did not show the variation but were homosexuals?

Finally, research bias may again be an issue. Dr. Hamer and at least one of his other team members are homosexual. It appears that this was deliberately kept from the press and was only revealed later. Dr. Hamer it turns out is not merely an objective observer. He has presented himself as an expert witness on homosexuality, and he has stated that he hopes his research would give comfort to men feeling guilty about their homosexuality.

By the way, this was a problem in every one of the studies we have mentioned in our discussion. For example, Dr. Simon LeVay said that he was driven to study the potential physiological roots of homosexuality after his homosexual lover died of AIDS. He even admitted that if he failed to find a genetic cause for homosexuality that he might walk away from science altogether. Later he did just that by moving to West Hollywood to open up a small, unaccredited “study center” focusing on homosexuality.

Each of these three studies looking for a biological cause for homosexuality has its flaws. Does that mean that there is no physiological component to homosexuality? Not at all.

Actually, it is probably too early to say conclusively. Scientists may indeed discover a clear biological predisposition to sexual orientation. But a predisposition is not the same as a determination. Some people may inherit a predisposition for anger, depression, or alcoholism, yet we do not condone these behaviors. And even if violence, depression, or alcoholism were proven to be inborn (determined by genetic material), would we accept them as normal and refuse to treat them? Of course not. The Bible has clear statements about such things as anger and alcoholism. Likewise, the Bible has clear statements about homosexuality.

In our discussion in this transcript, we have examined the various claims of pro-homosexual commentators and found them wanting. Contrary to their claims, the Bible does not condone homosexual behavior.

©1997 Probe Ministries