

The Need to Read: G. K. Chesterton

Continuing in '[The Need to Read](#)' series, Todd Kappelman examines the writings of G.K. Chesterton, a writer admired by both C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer.

A Christian for the Twentieth Century

This article is another installment in our continuing *Need to Read* series. The purpose of the series is to introduce people to authors they might enjoy and to offer some help by way of navigating through the themes developed in the works written by these individuals. It is regrettable that many people who enjoy C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer neglect the writings of Gilbert Keith, or G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a man who was admired by both Lewis and Schaeffer. George Bernard Shaw called him a “colossal genius” and Pope Pius XI called him “a devoted son of the Holy Church and a gifted defender of the faith.”[\[1\]](#)

Until his death at the age of seventy-two, Chesterton was a dominant figure in England and a staunch defender of the faith, and Christian orthodoxy, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Roman Catholic church. In addition to nearly one hundred books, he wrote for over seventy-five British periodicals and fifty American publications. He wrote literary criticism, religious and philosophical argumentation, biographies, plays, poetry, nonsense verse, detective stories, novels, short stories, and economic, political, and social commentaries.[\[2\]](#)

An excellent introduction to Chesterton can be found in a book titled *Orthodoxy*, published in the United States in 1908, and affectionately dedicated to his mother. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton gives an apologetic defense of his Christian faith.

He believed this defense was necessary to answer some of the criticism directed at his previous book, *Heretics*.[{3}](#)

Before Schaeffer wrote *Escape From Reason*, Chesterton titled the third chapter of *Orthodoxy* "The Suicide of Thought," a chronicle of the demise of modern man.

Chesterton believed that what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. "Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert, is exactly the part he ought to doubt³/₄ himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason."[{4}](#)

Chesterton believed that man's autonomy had been elevated beyond the reason of God; each individual has become his or her own master. The sages can see no answer to the problem of religion, but that is not the trouble with modern sages. Modern man, and his sages, said Chesterton, cannot even see the riddle.

Modern men, he believed, had become like small children who are so stupid that they do not even object to obvious philosophical contradictions.[{5}](#) Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer after him, understood that religion in the twentieth century would become very philosophical even for the average man. Chesterton reminds us that Christians would be living in a time when many of their friends, family, and neighbors, as well as their co-workers and spouses, would no longer be living as though man had to be reasonable. Later Francis Schaeffer would call this same cultural phenomenon the age of *non-reason*.

Chesterton was very proud of being a Roman Catholic, and frequently defended his denomination as much as he did the

faith in general. He was a Roman Catholic who was also deeply concerned about the universal church and will probably be enjoyed by most people who like C. S. Lewis and a “Mere Christianity” type of approach to the faith.

Chesterton and a Reasonable Christianity

In his book *The Everlasting Man* one can find the mature Chesterton. It was written in 1925 just three years after the Roman Catholic church had received him at the age of almost fifty. In this book Chesterton employs a style of argumentation called the *reductio ad absurdum*.^{6} He assumes some of the claims of rationalists and agnostics to show the absurdity of their point of view. He begins with a demonstration that if man is treated as a mere animal the result would not only be ridiculous, but the world would not exist in its present state. Men do not really act as though there is nothing special and significant about human beings. They act as though man is unique and that he is the most superior and crowning achievement in the known universe.

In a section titled “The Riddles of the Gospel” Chesterton attempts to show what it would be like if an individual were to approach the Gospels and really confront the Christ of history who is presented there. He would not find a Christ who looks like other moral teachers. The Christ presented in the New Testament is not dull or insipid, He is dynamic and unparalleled in history. The Christ of the Gospels is full of perplexities and paradoxes.

The *freethinker* and many nonbelievers, said Chesterton, object to the apparent contradictions found in the Bible, especially as it pertains to Christ. Jesus admonished His followers to turn the other cheek and take no thought for tomorrow. However, He did not turn the other cheek with respect to the money changers in the Temple and was constantly warning people to prepare for the future. Likewise, Christ’s view of the marriage bond is unique and unparalleled in history. Jews,

Romans, and Greeks did not believe or even understand enough to disbelieve the mystical idea that the man and the woman had become one sacramental substance in the matrimonial union.[{7}](#) Christ's view of marriage is neither a product of His culture or even a logical development from the time period. It is an utterly strange and wonderful teaching which bears the stigma of being from another world.

Before C. S. Lewis had formulated his observations that Christ is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord, Chesterton had laid out the very same problem. The Christ of the New Testament, said Chesterton, is not a mere mythical figure. He cannot be merely another ethical teacher or even a good man; these options are not open to anyone who would honestly consider the Christ who is encountered in the Scriptures. The question remains, Who is Christ?

In *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton maintains that each of the aforementioned explanations are singularly inadequate. The belief that Christ was a delusional lunatic, or even a good teacher, suggests something of the mystery which they miss.[{8}](#) There must be something to a person who is so mysterious and confusing that he has inspired as much controversy as Christ.

Christ is who He said He was and is infinitely more mysterious than the finite human mind can fully comprehend. In his writings G. K. Chesterton demonstrates that he is a Christian writer who possessed those rare and necessary gifts which allow difficult theological and philosophical problems to be understood and discussed by the average man.

Chesterton's Reflections on America

Chesterton's writings cover theological, philosophical, social, political, and economic trends simultaneously with particular attention to a Christian worldview. In the two works *What I Saw In America* and *Sidelights*, Chesterton offers the reader his reflections on America during the early part of

the twentieth century.

On January 10, 1921 Chesterton and his wife Frances began a three month tour of America. Their first stop was in New York City. Here Chesterton examined the lights of Broadway and proclaimed: "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."[{9}](#) This begins the great man's observations and impressions of the New World, skyscrapers, rural America, Washington politics, and the nation's spiritual condition.

Some of the central themes that emerge in *Sidelights*, and especially in *What I Saw In America*, are Chesterton's views of the effects of rationalism, commercialism, and the general spiritual poverty of many Americans. Although he is painting with extremely large brush strokes, there is much that can be learned about who we were at the early part of the twentieth century and how we became what we are today.

Chesterton was able to see both sides of the American experiment: the dream as well as the nightmare. He appears to dwell on the down side to balance the kind of utopian optimism that frequently blinds Americans to the true realities of their living conditions. Chesterton said that his first impression of America was of something enormous and rather unnatural, and was tempered gradually by his experience of kindness among the people. Additionally, and with all sincerity, he added that there was something unearthly about the vast system which seemed to be a kind of wandering in search of an ideal utopia of the future. He said "the march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. [T]he latest modern sensation is a book," referring here to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, "written to show how wretched it is to live there."[{10}](#)

Chesterton thought about America frequently and she would be one of his favorite subjects for almost twenty-five years

after his first visit. His frequent discussion about drinking and smoking may strike many readers as peripheral, a kind of antiquated masculine fun. But these matters were crucial to Chesterton's view of a complete life and for him represented a misguided moralism in the United States. The puritanical incongruity of Americans would serve Chesterton as a point of departure for all of his thinking about the New World.

Chesterton was an Englishman and is in a position to offer criticism from the point of view of a foreigner without the difficulties of a language barrier. Although he understood that his native England and Europe at large were going through the same philosophical and social changes, it is the speed at which America was rushing to embrace all things new that alarmed him. In *What I Saw in America* one will really discover what Chesterton found alarming and dangerous about our country in the early twentieth century.

Chesterton was confronted with prohibition on both of his trips to America and was deeply concerned with its effects on both Christian and secular aspects of society. He never tired of the extended metaphor of prohibition as the condition of religion in the United States. Making a comparison between the Carrie Nation style of saloon smashing prohibition and the Nonconformists in his native England, Chesterton believed that both groups suffered from an astoundingly fixed and immovable notion of the nature of Christianity.[{11}](#)

Chesterton saw in this legalistic stance toward liquor an indicator of what was truly wrong Protestant religion in America. He said it is a pretty safe bet that if any popular American author has mentioned religion and morality at the beginning of a paragraph, he will at least mention liquor before the end of it. To men of different creeds and cultures the whole idea would be staggering.[{12}](#) The natural result was that the man on the street frequently equated Christianity with a strong stance against drinking, smoking, and gambling. As a consequence, salvation has as much to do with abstinence

as it does with regeneration.

The Victorian hypocrisy was that there were family prayers and the form of religion, but only so far as it was a cover-up for an anti-traditionalist mentality. The average Christian, believed Chesterton, was professing his religion on the one hand and embracing a pervasive and destructive industrial commercialism on the other.[\[13\]](#) The astute observation of Chesterton was of a man witnessing a strange new phenomenon, Christians reconciling their prosperity with their faith.

In spite of a Great Depression, one World War that would soon lead to another, and numerous social injustices, the twentieth century in the early thirties was still a time when personal ownership of cars, regular vacations, and numerous other opportunities were increasingly available to more Americans. This was the true formation of the American dream, and it would be closely tied to materialism in the most crass form.

Chesterton was vindicated in his harsh observations about America on several fronts. First, there was then and still remains a large segment of the Christian population that believes Christian faith to be little more than a list of prohibitions. It is not that there are not things Christians should and should not participate in, rather it is the stifling of the Christian imagination with respect to the many ways which faith can manifest itself. For Chesterton the belief that good Christians do not drink would be tantamount to saying that one must wear a tie on Sunday morning to be in good standing in the faith. In the same way that some consider the latter statement to be ridiculous it was puzzling to Chesterton, as well as C. S. Lewis, why some American Christians failed to recognize the same in the former statement.

As for the American dream, Chesterton's words are still a sober warning for the unique way in which Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, have largely become a nation of

consumers. We may read his words during the early part of the twentieth century as warnings not to repeat the same mistakes now.

The Unreasonableness of Modern Man

Chesterton was a prolific journalist whose books and contributions to over one hundred American and British journals and periodicals continue to be read by Christians throughout the world. The need to return to this seminal thinker can be seen in the relevance some of his shorter works still have today.

In the *T. P. Weekly* in 1910, Chesterton wrote a small piece titled *What is Right with the World?* In it he acknowledges the fact that the world does not appear to be getting very much better in any vital aspects and that this fact could hardly be disputed.[{14}](#) However, Chesterton does not leave the reader with the pessimistic observation that the world is not a very nice place. He adds that the only thing that is right with the world is the world itself. Existence itself as well as man and woman are right inasmuch as they were created right. The fact that so much is wrong did not distress Chesterton; it was merely an occasion

to demonstrate that the world bears the stigma of having been good at one time and now being evil. The blackness of the world, said Chesterton, is not so black if we recognize how and why things are like they are.

At one point in a work titled *The Common Man* Chesterton attempts to show why it is necessary for every individual to have a philosophy. The best reason being that certain horrible things will happen to anyone who does not possess some kind of coherent worldview.[{15}](#) Sounding very much like a contemporary Christian apologist, Chesterton said that a man without a philosophy would be doomed to live on the used-up scraps of other men's thought systems.[{16}](#)

Chesterton continues to challenge the idea that philosophy is for the few, arguing that most of our modern evils are the result of the want of a good philosophy. Philosophy, he said, was merely thought which had been thoroughly thought through. All men test everything by something. The question is whether the test has ever been tested.^[17] One can see in Chesterton the same vigorous call to reflective thinking that Francis Schaeffer used fifty years later to call an entire generation of Christians to become more philosophic and begin engaging the culture at a more substantive level.

We have been attempting to make a case for the need to read G. K. Chesterton's works, and have urged those who enjoy C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, or Peter Kreeft to give Chesterton a look. In closing, Chesterton's poem *The Happy Man* from his book *The Wild Night* will serve as a conclusion.

To teach the grey earth like a child,
To bid the heavens repent,
I only ask from Fate the gift
Of one man well content.
Him will I find: though when in vain
I search the feast and mart,
The fading flowers of liberty,
The painted masks of art.
I only find him as the last,
On one old hill where nod
Golgotha's ghastly trinity—
Three persons and one God.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy*, by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.
2. Hosea 4:6.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.
5. Ibid., 217-224.
6. Ibid., 225-236.
7. Ibid., 261-270.
8. Ibid., 207-208.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent in Francis*
A. Schaeffer Trilogy (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990),
277.
10. Ibid., 275-290.
11. Ibid., 291-302.
12. Ibid., 211.

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Soren Kierkegaard and the Supremacy of Faith

Kierkegaard—The Radical Reformer

One of the most difficult barriers to evangelism today is the difficulty in defining what it *is* to be a Christian. Some consider attendance in a Christian church to be sufficient, while a vast number of people simply associate “Christian” with being a good, moral person. And in a country such as the U.S., there are even those who assume American citizenship is an adequate basis for being a Christian. This is what happens when people reject the Bible for its understanding of divine truth.

However, this predicament is not unique to the 21st century. In the mid-nineteenth century, one of the great defenders of

Christianity confronted this very problem in his native Denmark. Disturbed by the culture's definition of Christianity, Søren Kierkegaard dedicated his life to a defense of Christianity that was truly a way of life rather than simply the acceptance of a church creed. Kierkegaard was especially disturbed that the Danish church had accepted its definition of Christianity from the famous German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. For Hegel, rationality was the supreme virtue, and Christianity was the ultimate religion because the doctrine of the Trinity was in accordance with his own understanding of logic: God the Father and Jesus Christ are identical since each is God, and yet they are different from one another since they are distinct individuals. This apparent "difference" is then reconciled by the fact that God has made Himself known through the Holy Spirit's birthing of the church. Hegel found this definition of the Trinity to be the mirror image of his own understanding of logic, in which opposites are to be synthesized in order to come to a fuller understanding of reality.

Hegel's reference to Christianity as the ultimate religion led many to assume that he was a strong advocate of Christianity. However, for Hegel, "reality" was only what could be experienced in the here and now. He rejected any suggestion that there was an afterlife or otherworldly existence. And while he referred to Christianity as the ultimate religion, he also declared that religion was subordinate to his own philosophy. Because Christianity is based on faith, Hegel taught that to be rational we must go beyond religion and turn to Hegel's own philosophy if we are to understand ultimate reality.

It was Kierkegaard's self-appointed task to confront Hegel's thinking and to present the supremacy of the Christian faith to the Danish people. His brilliant apologetic effort was so ridiculed, however, that for years after his death Danish parents admonished their children "don't be a Søren" in order

to warn them about foolish behavior. In order to understand why, it will be necessary first to examine Kierkegaard's life and strategy, after which we will discuss his well-known works.

Kierkegaard and His Pseudonyms

Few people today know the story of Morris Childs. Childs, who as a young man was a high ranking official in the American communist party, became an informant for the FBI against communism in the early fifties. Because of his background, Childs moved easily among communist leaders, both in the United States and abroad, for nearly thirty years. And yet, due to the highly secretive nature of his mission, very few of his fellow American citizens realized that Morris Childs was a true patriot. Instead, he was considered by many to be a communist, a traitor. Far from being a traitor, Childs had risked his life in order to pass on highly sensitive information to his American spy-masters.

Like Childs in the political realm, Søren Kierkegaard has been misunderstood by many of his fellow Christians. Partly due to the influence of Francis Schaeffer, who blamed Kierkegaard for the modern trend toward irrationalism, there are those who assume that Kierkegaard was a secularist. However, part of the genius of Kierkegaard was his desire to present the truth of Christianity from the perspective of a non-Christian. Consequently, many of his books were written under various pseudonyms.

When reading Kierkegaard under one of these pseudonyms, you can never assume that everything Kierkegaard is writing is his own belief. Instead, he typically introduces himself to the reader as a non-believer who, for whatever reason, is interested in religious questions. It was Kierkegaard's belief that the most important religious and ethical questions could not be communicated directly. He therefore developed a method famously known as "indirect communication" in which he hoped

to establish common ground with the non-believer. By not introducing himself as a Christian, he sought an audience for the gospel that he would not have gained otherwise.

Another aspect of Kierkegaard's life that must be taken into account is his tragic relationship with a young woman named Regina Olsen. Kierkegaard deeply loved Regina, and for a short period of time they were engaged to be married. But Kierkegaard forced himself to break off the engagement. And the fact that they never married was, for Kierkegaard, the true proof of his love for her. Much of his motivation for the break-up was based on the melancholy nature he had received from his father. Kierkegaard's father, Michael, had cursed God as a young boy due to his miserable working conditions and was haunted all his life by the suspicion that he had committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. Not only did Kierkegaard hope to spare Regina from his own depression, he also attempted to demonstrate in his writings that his rejection of Regina was motivated by love, just as God's love for us was revealed through His rejection of His own beloved Son.

Kierkegaard on the Incarnation

The Weigh-Down Workshop, a weight loss program developed by Gwen Shamblin, is based on the admirable thesis that those who would like to lose weight should replace their excessive hunger for food with hunger for God. But recently it became evident that Shamblin's Christian beliefs are [unorthodox](#). According to Shamblin, the doctrine of the Trinity is a "man-made" formula that arose in a polytheistic society in order to "make sure no one mistakenly believed that Christians worshipped several gods." Shamblin is under the mistaken belief that trinitarian teaching suggests that Jesus and God are the same person, when in fact the biblical teaching is that Jesus (the Son) and God (the Father) are distinctive persons, identical in their divine essence.

In one of Kierkegaard's more famous works, *The Philosophical Fragments*, it is suggested that the doctrine of the Incarnation is indeed the ultimate paradox: How can it make sense that God became man? But Kierkegaard wrote this work under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus. Johannes Climacus does not claim to be a Christian, but he is at odds with the philosophy of Hegel, who sees faith as a stepping-stone to the ultimacy of reason. Climacus is intent on demonstrating that, if Hegel is right, then Christianity is completely wrong. But, if Hegel is wrong, then it is possible to understand that doctrines such as the Incarnation reveal the logical superiority of Christian faith.

Climacus begins by asking if the truth can be learned. He therefore questions what kind of teacher would be capable of bringing the truth to human beings who do not know the truth. Since all people are created by God, it must have been God who made it possible for human beings to know the truth. But since people don't know the truth, then only a divine being could teach human beings the truth. And what is it that prevents people from knowing the truth? It is sin. And since the teacher must bring people out of this sinful condition in order for them to understand truth, this teacher should also be seen as a savior, a deliverer. But, to be a savior for humans, this divine being must also become human as well, which is illogical to those who have not received the truth. All this is to suggest, however, that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is perfectly consistent for the person of faith.

Yet, since Climacus is writing in response to the philosophy of Hegel, he points out that God becoming a man is absurd, a paradox beyond human comprehension. For this reason many readers assume that Kierkegaard *himself* thought that the Incarnation was absurd, when in fact he was emphasizing that mere human reason was insufficient to be a Christian. For Kierkegaard, biblical faith takes us beyond what human reason

can possibly conceive.

Kierkegaard on Abraham

Mohammed Ali was one of the greatest fighters of all time. After he began calling himself "The Greatest," that title quickly became associated with Ali. We often debate about the greatness of athletes and politicians, but rarely in our pluralistic society do we present our position on the greatness of religious figures. And yet that is exactly what Kierkegaard did in his work, *Fear and Trembling*, written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio. Johannes is fascinated by Abraham and desires to understand how anyone could be as great as Abraham.

Johannes is intrigued by a seeming paradox: How is it that Abraham is routinely recognized to be one of the greatest figures in all of Scripture, the father of faith, and yet at the same time we must admit that he was a split-second away from murdering his own son? If anyone were to emulate Abraham in modern times, we would do our best to prevent such a heinous act. Yet, at the same time preachers routinely preach on the greatness of Abraham. Johannes concludes that what made Abraham so amazing was his belief that he would receive Isaac back in *this* life, rather than just in the life everlasting. Still, this leads to the conclusion that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac. How, then, can we exalt Abraham as a great man?

Johannes proceeds to examine the purpose behind Abraham's action. This is where, once again, Kierkegaard is intent on skewering the philosophy of Hegel. According to Hegel, the individual was to subordinate his own desires for the broader good of the institutions of family, civil society, and the state. Consequently, it would have been Hegel's position that Abraham's actions were both ludicrous and evil since they did not conform with the ethical standards of a civilized people. As a result, Johannes forces us to ask whether the philosophy of Hegel or the teaching of Scripture is to take priority.

Johannes' own unique answer is that, in order to understand Abraham's relationship to God, there must be what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." *Teleology* is the idea that everything has a purpose. For Hegel, the ultimate purpose of ethics was for the members of a state to share the same moral virtue, under which circumstances a nation can be joined together with a common bond. But for Johannes, the individual takes priority over the state. Abraham's actions were guided by a higher purpose than simply conforming to the ethical norms of society. His faith enabled him to obey God to the point of becoming a murderer, while believing that God would raise his beloved son from the dead. Who then is greater? Hegel, or Abraham? Human reason gives one answer, but Christian faith another.

Kierkegaard and Truth

"What is truth?" The famous question of Pilate to Jesus has become even more pertinent today, as truth has become more a matter of pragmatic concerns rather than having any correlation with reality. Biblical Christianity is grounded on the truths of God's Word, and the loss of truth in a postmodern society has had a devastating effect on the influence of the gospel. Thus, on first glance it can be disturbing that Kierkegaard claimed that all truth is subjectivity. To conclude this article, I want to explore exactly what he means by this phrase.

We must be very careful when reading someone as elusive as Kierkegaard. Once again, it is Johannes Climacus who is the spokesman for the claim that all truth is subjectivity. Climacus is again attacking the philosophy of Hegel, who claimed that it was possible for human beings to possess absolute knowledge through carefully analyzing human existence. Climacus questions how it is possible to have absolute certainty in this life, especially when we consider the wide variance between philosophers since ancient times.

More importantly, the claim of absolute knowledge seems to mean that, for the Christian, knowing is more important than believing. Since faith, as in the case of Abraham, often times requires patience and endurance before reaching its fulfillment, there is a qualitative difference between faith and knowledge. According to Climacus, only God can have absolute knowledge. This is important to consider when pondering the assertion that all truth is subjective, for Climacus is making a major distinction between the human realm and the divine realm.

One of Kierkegaard's major emphases in his writings was that the Christian life is more than simply believing in orthodox doctrine. He himself was passionate about his relationship with Christ, and was disgusted by the apathetic attitude of many church-goers. Consequently, when Climacus claims that all truth is subjectivity he is claiming that human beings must appropriate the truth of whatever they believe if it is truly to take hold of their lives. There can be no such thing as a passive, disinterested Christian. Neither should the Christian confuse knowledge, which can never be complete in this life, with the life of faith. The Christian must make a leap of faith, in the sense that faith always involves risk. Climacus therefore hoped to contrast the willingness to believe and *live out* the truths of Christianity against the acceptance of philosophical systems that did not require any personal commitment. This, for Climacus, is the difference between subjective and objective truth.

As we have seen, it is very easy to construe Kierkegaard as a non-Christian if we do not take into consideration his strategy of indirect communication. Hopefully this brief introduction to Kierkegaard's thought will stimulate many to a fuller appreciation for this important Christian thinker.

Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions

Rick Rood discusses the fact of religious pluralism in our age, the origin of non-Christian religions, and the Christian's attitude toward other religions.

Few facts have become more evident in our lifetime than the fact that we live in a pluralistic world and society. With the rapid increase in the transmission of information and the ability to travel on a worldwide scale has also come an increasing awareness that both our world and society contain a multitude of diverse and conflicting viewpoints on many different issues.

No where is this pluralism more evident than in the realm of religion. More than ever before, we are conscious of the existence of the world's many religions-not only the major religions of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but also a host of smaller yet enduring religious movements.

According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are approximately 1 billion Muslims, over 650 million Hindus, over 300 million Buddhists, over 200 million followers of Chinese folk religion, in addition to the world's 1.6 billion nominal Christians. What is important for us to understand is that these figures are more than statistics in a book or almanac. They represent real people; people who are born, live, and die every day.

What brings this reality home even more, however, is the fact that an increasing number of followers of non-Christian

religions are living in our cities, in our communities, and in our neighborhoods. Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu worship centers can be found in every metropolitan area of the United States.

As followers of Jesus Christ, what should our attitude be toward non-Christian religions and toward those who embrace them? Among those who are seeking to respond to this question, three distinct answers can be heard today. Some are saying that we must acknowledge that all religions are equally (or nearly equally) valid as ways to approach God. Though there may be superficial differences among the world's religions, at heart they are fundamentally the same. Often the analogy is used of people taking different paths up the same mountain, but all arriving at the same summit. This is the viewpoint known as religious pluralism.

Others, more anxious to preserve some sense of uniqueness for the Christian faith, yet equally desirous of projecting an attitude of tolerance and acceptance, are committed to the viewpoint known as Christian inclusivism. In their opinion, though people of another religious conviction may be ignorant of Christ—or possibly even have rejected Him—yet because of their positive response to what they know about God, or even due to their efforts to follow the dictates of their conscience, they are unknowingly included in the number of those who are recipients of Christ's salvation. The analogy is sometimes used of a person who receives a gift, but is unaware of who the ultimate giver of the gift may be.

A third viewpoint is known as Christian exclusivism. This is the viewpoint traditionally held by the majority of those who accept the Bible as their authority in spiritual matters. It is the view that though there are indeed truths and values in many other religions, there is only one saving truth, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. This view is most naturally deduced from Jesus' well known statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me"

(John 14:6).

What should the Christian's attitude be toward non-Christian religions and their followers? This is a question becoming more difficult to ignore. To answer this question accurately and fairly we must look into the way non-Christian religions began.

The Origin of Non-Christian Religions

There are, of course, what we might call "naturalistic" explanations of the origin of all religions. Those committed to a naturalistic worldview that denies the existence of God or of a supernatural realm see all religions as the product of man's imagination in some way. They might say that religion is the expression of man's fear of the overwhelming forces of nature, or of his desire to overcome death. While such naturalistic factors may indeed play a role in the development of some religious sentiments, they are hardly sufficient to account for the origin of all religious belief.

From the perspective of one committed to a supernaturalistic worldview, and particularly from the Christian viewpoint, there are several elements that may have contributed to the origin of non-Christian religion. First, where we find truth in non-Christian religion, we must attribute this to God. He is the source of all truth. We know that, in the beginning, the truth about God was universally known. And it is possible that remnants of this "original revelation" have survived in the memory of peoples around the world. It is also possible that some elements of truth were implanted in some cultures by ancient contact with God's people, Israel, with early Christians, or with portions of the Scriptures. We know, for example, that Islam owes a great deal to the influence of both Judaism and Christianity due to Mohammed's early contact with representatives of both religions.

Second, we must recognize that where there is falsehood or

even a twisted perspective on the truth, this is the result of man's sinful nature in repressing the truth about God. Romans 1 states that man's nature is to suppress the truth about God that is evident to him, and to substitute for it what Paul calls "futile speculations" (Rom. 1:21).

Third, we cannot deny the influence of Satan and his demons in inspiring "counterfeit" religious expressions and experiences. For example, Psalm 106:36-37 states that those who serve idols offer sacrifices to demons. The apostle Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10:20. And in his first letter to Timothy he attributed false religious teachings to "deceitful spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1). In his second letter to the Corinthians, he stated that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14) and that he disguises many of his agents as "servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15). Satan often promotes what is evil. But he can just as easily promote a high level of morality or religion so long as it discourages people from recognizing their need for the unmerited grace of God, expressed through the death of Jesus Christ.

In summary, non-Christian religions can (1) represent man's response to the truth about God that he knows. It can also (2) represent man's attempt to suppress the truth and substitute his own speculations. Finally, it can (3) represent the deception of Satan, who replaces the truth with a lie.

Are There Many Ways to God?

Now we must turn our attention to a related issue concerning non-Christian religions, the idea or attitude called religious pluralism. Religious pluralism suggests that there are only superficial differences among the religions and that these differences are greatly overshadowed by their similarities. Thus, to this school of thought all religions share a fundamental unity that renders them equally valid as approaches to God.

Of course, the most immediate difficulty posed by religious pluralism for the Christian is that it compels him to deny any claims to the uniqueness of Christ or of Christianity.

The claims of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and Savior of the world must be recast as mere exaggerations of the early Christians. It is impossible to embrace religious pluralism and hold to the authority of the New Testament when it speaks of the uniqueness of Christ and of the salvation He has provided.

Beyond this, however, religious pluralism significantly underestimates the differences between the teachings of the various religions. This can be seen, for example, in the differences between Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, with regard to their teaching concerning salvation. In classical Buddhism, the problem facing humanity is the suffering caused by desire. Since whatever man desires is impermanent, and ultimately leads to frustration and sorrow, the way to peace of mind and ultimate "salvation" is through the elimination of all desire—even the desire to live! In classical Hinduism, the problem facing humanity is our being trapped in this illusory, material world over the course of many lifetimes primarily due to our ignorance of our true identity as fundamentally divine beings! The solution to our dilemma is our recognition of our true divine nature. In Islam, man's problem is his failure to live by the law of God which has been revealed through His prophets. The solution is to commit ourselves to obeying God's laws, in hope that our good deeds will outweigh the bad. In Christianity, the problem is similar—our rebellion against the will of God. But the solution is much different. It is through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, provided by God's unmerited grace. From these examples alone, it is evident that though there may be superficial similarities among the world's religions the differences are fundamental in nature!

Not surprisingly, most pluralists are unfazed by these

differences in belief. They emphasize that in spite of these differences, if the various religions foster a common "religious experience" or result in the moral and ethical improvement of man, this is enough to show that they are valid ways to God. The problem is that with regard to "religious experience." Even here there are significant differences. And with regard to the moral and ethical effect of the various religions, this is something impossible for us to measure. For, as Jesus so strongly emphasized, morality is as much a matter of the heart as it is of action. And this is something only God can know!

We must conclude, then, that due to its denial of the uniqueness of Christ, and to its failure to take seriously the vast differences among the world's religions, religious pluralism does not represent a valid point of view for the Christian.

Are the Followers of Other Religions Recipients of Christ's Salvation?

A more subtle and attractive theory of reaching out to non-Christians is the concept called Christian inclusivism. Inclusivists hold that, though Christ is the unique Savior, nonetheless there are many people included in His salvation who are ignorant of this fact—even followers of other religions.

Inclusivists generally hold that Christ's salvation is available to those who positively respond to the truth they have—whether it be through creation, conscience, another religion, or some other means. Such individuals are sometimes termed anonymous Christians.

There is no question that this is a very attractive approach to the problem of world religions. Inclusivism seeks to widen the extent of God's grace while still preserving a commitment to the uniqueness of Christ. It must be acknowledged also,

that God could have arranged things in this way if He had so chosen. The question is not, however, whether inclusivism is an attractive position, or a logically possible one, but whether the evidence is convincing that it is true. And for the Christian, this means the evidence of Scripture.

Inclusivists generally recognize this and seek to find support for their view in Scripture. We will briefly look at one biblical example that is often used to support the idea of inclusivism—the case of Cornelius the centurion recorded in Acts 10.

In this chapter Cornelius is referred to as “a devout man, . . . who feared God,” even before he heard the gospel. This is often pointed to as evidence that he was an anonymous Christian before believing in Christ. It must be remembered, however, that in the next chapter (specifically in Acts 11:14), it is clearly stated that though Cornelius was favorably disposed to God he did not receive salvation until he heard and believed in the gospel.

Other examples could be discussed. But in each case we would see that a good deal must be read into (or out of) the text to arrive at the conclusion that salvation can come to those who do not know Christ.

Furthermore, there are clear statements that it is necessary to hear and believe in the gospel to receive salvation. Perhaps the clearest is Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of (or about) Christ.” Hebrews 9:27 also strongly suggests that this faith in Christ must be expressed before we die: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”

What then of people, like Cornelius, who do respond to the truth they know about God, but do not yet know of Christ? Is there no hope for them? Actually, the case of Cornelius provides a good illustration of what seems to be the biblical

solution to this problem. Because he had responded to what he knew about God, God saw that he eventually received the gospel—in his case through Peter. But it was only then that he experienced Christ's salvation and the forgiveness of sins. This principle was also well summarized in Jesus' statement: "To him who has, shall more be given" (Mark 4:25).

Based on our confidence in the faithfulness of God, we can be assured that the gospel will come to all those whom God knows would be prepared, like Cornelius, to receive it. And He has commissioned us to carry the message to them!

What Should Our Attitude Be Toward Other Religions?

In the course of this short discussion we have examined the attitude of religious pluralism, as well as that of Christian inclusivism. The former holds that all religions are equally valid. The latter holds that Christ is the unique savior, but that His salvation can extend to followers of other religions. In both cases, we concluded that the evidence in support of these views is inadequate.

The only remaining option is the attitude of Christian exclusivism—the view that biblical Christianity is true, and that other religious systems are false. This is more than implied in numerous biblical statements, such as in Acts 4:12: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

This is not to say, however, that there are no truths at all in non-Christian religions. There are certainly moral and ethical truths, for instance, in Buddhism. In Buddha's Eightfold Path, he appealed to his followers to pursue honesty, charity, and service, and to abstain from murder and lust. We should certainly affirm these ethical truths.

Likewise, there are theological truths in other religions—truths about God that we could equally affirm. These may be more scarce in religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. But Orthodox Judaism and Islam certainly share our belief in a personal Creator—God, though Christianity is unique in the monotheistic tradition with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. There are even truths about Jesus that we share in common with Muslims—that He was a prophet of God, and the Messiah, and that He worked many miracles, though they deny that He was the Son of God, or that He died for the sins of the world.

We can, and should affirm these moral and theological truths that we share in common with followers of other religions. We must acknowledge, however, that in no other religion is any saving truth to be found. And as mentioned earlier, there is no other religion that presents the human dilemma, or solution to that dilemma, in quite the same way as does the Christian faith. In Christianity, the problem is not ignorance of our divine nature—as in Hinduism—nor simply our desire—as in Buddhism. The problem is our alienation from God and His blessing due to our failure to live according to His will—what the Bible calls sin. And the solution is neither in self-discipline, nor in revised thinking, nor even in moral effort. The solution lies in the grace of God, expressed in His provision of His Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for our sin. Salvation is not something we achieve; it is something we receive.

It is clear, then, that though there are superficial similarities among the world's religions, there are fundamental differences. And the most important difference is the person and work of Christ.

What should our attitude be toward followers of other religions? It is important for us to distinguish our attitude toward non-Christian religions from our attitude toward followers of those religions. Though we are to reject the

religion, we are not to reject them by mistakenly perceiving them to be “the enemy.” The biblical injunction is to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves no matter what their religion. Rather than viewing them as “the enemy,” we should see them as “the victims” of the enemy who are in need of the same grace that has freed us from spiritual slavery—in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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“God is One, Not Three”

Many questions remain unanswered [concerning the article [“What Difference Does the Trinity Make?”](#)]. Why just three? Is not three not big enough also according to your own logic to contain all that God is? Is he not only Father, Son, Spirit as well as healer, brother, provider, salvation etc.? The list goes on as you well know. Consider this—that it pleased the Father that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him (Jesus) bodily. Again your logic would say that Jesus would not be big enough to contain all that God is. Why bring human logic into this at all? It is human logic that cannot contain all that God is. The Father of Jesus is the Spirit since it was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary. God is a spirit according to Jesus himself. All things were created by Jesus according to Colossians. God robed himself in flesh according to John 1:14. Why do you have a problem believing that Jesus is God? Jesus told Peter to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in Matthew. Peter then according to his instruction baptized in Jesus’ name on the day of Pentecost. You are mistaking all the attributes of God for persons of God. There is no scripture to justify you claim that God is more than one person. You quoted “Hear ye O Israel the Lord

our God the Lord is one.” There are no other Gods besides me. there is none like me. I alone created the heavens and the earth. Do not let logic cloud your reasoning. God is not logical in human terms. His ways are above our ways. God/Jesus both said I am alpha and omega. Once you get a revelation of who God is and the duality of the man/God Jesus you will understand that God cannot be relegated to any number of persons but one.

Thanks for your patience in waiting for me to reply to your email regarding my article on the Trinity.

Many questions remain unanswered [concerning the article “What Difference Does the Trinity Make?"]. Why just three? Is not three not big enough also according to your own logic to contain all that God is? Is he not only Father, Son, Spirit as well as healer, brother, provider, salvation etc.? The list goes on as you well know. Consider this—that it pleased the Father that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him (Jesus) bodily. Again your logic would say that Jesus would not be big enough to contain all that God is.

With regard to, Why just three? I’ll have to say, because that is all that biblical revelation gives us. Your question centers on a confusion between the ontological Trinity (who God is) and the economic Trinity (what God does). The orthodox formulation of the Trinity is concerned with who God is, not what he does. Therefore, your categories of healer, brother, provider, salavation, etc. could not be designations of the persons within the Trinity, for to an extent all of the Godhead is involved in all that the Godhead does.

Why bring human logic into this at all? It is human logic that cannot contain all that God is. The Father of Jesus is the Spirit since it was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary. God is a spirit according to Jesus himself. All things were created by Jesus according to Colossians. God robed himself

in flesh according to John 1:14. Why do you have a problem believing that Jesus is God?

I agree with you that human logic cannot contain all that God is. We are dependent, created creatures and His ways are indeed higher than ours. I wouldn't exactly say that the Spirit is the Father of God, but that the entire Trinity participated in the Incarnation. And finally, I don't have any problem believing that Jesus is God. He is God. The Scriptures plainly teach this and it is one of the most important aspects that motivated the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Jesus told Peter to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in Matthew. Peter then according to his instruction baptized in Jesus' name on the day of Pentecost. You are mistaking all the attributes of God for persons of God.

If you are arguing against the Trinity based on Peter's call, that would be insufficient evidence. Granted, Matthew's formulation is unique, but its uniqueness in no way disqualifies the Trinity. Early in the same speech Peter says, "God has raised this Jesus to life and we are witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he (Jesus) has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear." Peter clearly had more than Jesus *only* in mind on the day of Pentecost.

There is no scripture to justify you claim that God is more than one person. You quoted "Hear ye O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one." There are no other Gods besides me. there is none like me. I alone created the heavens and the earth.

If by this you mean that there is no single Scripture that says, "God exists in Trinity: one God, three persons who are

coequal and coeternal," you are exactly right. There is also no Scripture in which Jesus says, in as many words, "I am God." However there are clearly passages where Jesus claims to do things that only God can do. Likewise with the Trinity, we are collecting Scriptural "data" by which we can conclude that the Father is God, the Son (Jesus) is God, the Holy Spirit is God, yet God is One (Deut. 6:4). That's just doing theology, an inescapable process for anyone who reads the Bible.

Do not let logic cloud your reasoning. God is not logical in human terms. His ways are above our ways. God/Jesus both said I am alpha and omega. Once you get a revelation of who God is and the duality of the man/God Jesus you will understand that God cannot be relegated to any number of persons but one.

I disagree with you. While God is not reducible to the point where we can understand Him, He does "make sense" or "make Himself known to us." He is, to some degree, understandable and we know this because He has condescended to make Himself known. We understand things through our rational faculties. This does not give us comprehensive knowledge of God, but it does give us intelligible knowledge of God. As far as your conclusion goes, the two natures of Christ are precisely what motivated the kind of theological reflection that lead to the doctrine of the Trinity. Finally, God is not relegated to anything. God has revealed Himself and we must respond to what He has said. If you're holding to a mono-personal God, the burden of proof is on your side. The church as confessed the trinity for over 1500 years and it has done so for good reason.

Thanks for your interest in dialogue, and thank you for reading the article. I hope that this has been of some help or interest to you. Feel free to write back. Keep reading and thinking.

Greg Crosthwait

What Do I Say Now?

“True for You, But Not For Me”

Since the church began, objections have been raised to the faith. They have varied according to the beliefs and mindset of the day. To be effective in taking a stand for the truth, Christians have had to know the current questions and objections. Maybe youve heard some of the more common objections today such as “Jesus never claimed to be God,” or, “What gives *you* the right to say other peoples morals are wrong?” Or how about, “That might be true for you, but its not true for me.” Sometimes these objections are well thought out, but often they sound more like slogans, catch-phrases the non-believer has heard but to which he or she probably hasnt given much thought.

If objections such as these have brought an abrupt end to any of your conversations because you werent sure how to respond, a book published last year might be just what you need. The title is *“True For You, But Not For Me”: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless*, and it was written by Paul Copan, an associate with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Copans goal in this book is to provide responses for Christians who find themselves stumped by the objections of critics. To that end he deals with objections in such areas as knowledge of truth, morality, the uniqueness of Christ, and the hope of those whove never heard the Gospel.

In this article, Ill pull out a few of these objections and give brief answers, some from Copan, and some of my own.

Before doing that, however, I need to make an important point. If non-believers are doing nothing more than sloganeering by hurling objections that they really don't understand, rattling off memorized answers that we don't understand, Christians can be guilty of the same behavior of our opponents. Even though the objections might sound recorded, our answers needn't. Thus, I strongly suggest that you get a copy of Copan's book or obtain some other books on apologetics which will fill in the gaps left by our discussion.

Relativism

Let's begin with a brief look at the issue of relativism and what it means for discussions about Christianity.

Relativism shows itself primarily in matters of truth and morality. When we say that truth is relative, we mean that it differs according to the times, or to particular circumstances, or to differing tastes and interests. It is the denial that objective truth exists; that is, truth that applies to all people and for all time. Now, most people will probably agree that there is truth in matters of scientific fact, but with respect to religion and morality, each person is said to have his or her own truth. Such things are matters of opinion at best, and are true only relative to particular individuals.

The implications of this are enormous. Evangelism, or the effort to persuade people to believe that the Gospel is true, is prohibited.^{1} The claim to have *the* truth about a person's relationship with God is considered arrogant or elitist. Tolerance becomes the "cardinal virtue."^{2} The rule seems to be this: Follow your own heart, and don't interfere with anyone following his or hers.

These are problems which relativism produces in dealing with others. But what about our own Christianity? If truth isn't fixed, maybe I should just drop all this Christian business

when it becomes inconvenient.

Relativism with Respect to Knowledge

Lets consider the objection represented in the title of Copans book: that is, "Well, that may be true for *you*, but its not for *me*." Here the non-believer is essentially saying that its okay for you to adopt Christianity if you choose– that it can be *your* truth. But as far as hes concerned, he has not chosen to believe it– for whatever reasons– so it isnt true for him.

This objection would make better sense if the critic said, "Christianity is *meaningful* for you, but it isnt for me." Or, "Christianity might *work* for you, but it doesnt for me." These are reasonable objections and invite serious discussion about the meaning of Christ for every individual and how Christianity "works" in our lives. But the objection voiced is that Christianity is *true* for some people, but not for others. How can that be? Truth is that which is real or statements about what is really the case. "True for you, but not for me" can only be a valid idea if truth is relative to persons, times, circumstances, or places.

The Christian should question the person about this. Does he believe that truth is relative? If so, then hes actually undercutting his own claims. You see, the statement, "It may be true for you, but its not for me," becomes relative as well. No statement the person makes can be considered a fixed truth that everyone– even the relativist– should believe. So, our first response might be to point out that, based upon his own relativistic views, anything *he* says is relative; its truth-status might change tomorrow. So theres no reason for anyone to take it seriously. [\[3\]](#)

On a deeper level we can point out that if theres no objective, fixed truth, all meaningful conversation will grind to a halt. If nothing a person says can be taken as true or false in the normal sense, the listener wont know if the

speaker really means what he says. What would be the value, for example, of reading the cautions on a bottle of pills if the meaning and truth of the words aren't set? Trying to communicate ideas when truth and meaning fluctuate like the stock market is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. There's no way to get hold of any idea with which to agree or disagree.

The non-believer might object that not all matters are relative, only matters of religion and morality. However, the burden is on the *relativist* to prove that matters of religion and morality *are* relative, for it isn't obvious that this is so. Why should these matters be treated differently with respect to truth than others? The fact that one can't debate morality on the basis of evidences as one would, say, a scientific issue doesn't mean that the truth about it can't be known. More important, however, is the fact that Christianity in particular is tied very tightly to historical events which *are* matters of fact.

Christianity can't be true for one person but not for another. Either it is true— and all should believe— or it isn't— and it should be discarded.

Moral Relativism

Lets turn our attention to objections regarding morality. One objection we hear is similar to one we've already discussed about truth. Non-believers will say, "Your values might be right for you, but they aren't for me."[{4}](#)

First, we need to understand the historic Christian view of morality. According to Scripture, morals are grounded in God. As God is unchanging, so also is His morality. As Paul Copan notes, such morals are discovered, not invented.[{5}](#) They are objective; they do not come from within you or me, but are true completely apart from us.

Having abandoned God as the standard for morality and replaced Him with ourselves, some say there is no objective morality. When told that a certain individual believed that morality is a sham, Samuel Johnson responded, "Why sir, if he really believes there is no distinction between virtue and vice, let us count our spoons before he leaves." {6} Johnsons quip doesnt prove that morals are objective, but it indicates how well have to live if they arent. If matters of morality are relative, how can we trust anything another person says about moral issues? For example, if a person says that you can trust him to hold your money for you because he is honest, how do you know whether what he means by "honest" is what *you* mean by it? And how can you be sure he wont decide once he has your money that honesty isnt such a good policy after all? Such a situation would be "existentially (or practically) unworkable." {7}

Paul Copan argues that we know intuitively that some things are wrong for everyone. Ask the non-believer if torture, slave labor, and rape are okay for some people. Ask him if there is a moral distinction between the labors of the late Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler. Or press him even further and ask how he would respond if he were arrested and beaten for no reason, or if someone pounded his car with a sledgehammer. {8} Would he feel better knowing that the perpetrators found personal fulfillment in such activities? Or would he cry "Unfair!"?

Some non-believers are willing to concede that within a given society there must be moral standards in order for people to live together in peace. However, theyll say, differences between *cultures* are legitimate. Thus, theyll complain, "Who are *you* to say another cultures values are wrong?" {9} One culture has no right to force its morality on another.

But is it true that moral standards are culturally relative? Or perhaps the better question should be, Is it really likely that the non-believer believes this himself? You might recall

the Womens Conference in Beijing several years ago. Representatives from all over the world gathered to plan strategies for gaining rights for women who were being oppressed. Could a cultural relativist support such a conference? Its hard to see how. Cultural relativism leaves a society with its hands tied in the face of atrocities committed by people of other cultures. But as we have noted before, we know intuitively that some things are wrong, not just for me or my culture but for all peoples and all cultures. To take a firm stand against the immoral acts of individuals or cultures one needs the foundation of moral absolutes.

Religious Pluralism

Christians today, especially on college campuses, are free to believe as they please and practice their Christianity as they wish . . . as long as they arent foolish enough to actually say out loud that they believe that Jesus is the only way to God. Nothing brings on the wrath of non-believers and invites insults and name- calling like claims for the exclusivity of Christ.

Religious pluralism is in vogue today. Many people believe either that religions are truly different but equally valid since no one really knows the truth about ultimate realities. Others believe that the adherents of at least all the major religions are really worshipping the same "Higher Being;" they just call him (or it) by different names. Religions are superficially different, they believe, but essentially the same.

Lets look at a couple of objections stemming from a pluralistic mindset.

One objection is that "Christianity is arrogant and imperialistic"[{10}](#) for presenting itself as the only way. Of course, Christians can act in an arrogant and imperialistic

manner, and in such cases they deserve to be called down. But this objection often arises simply as a response to the claim of exclusivity regardless of the Christians manner. The only way this claim could be arrogant, however, is if there are indeed competing religions or philosophies which are equally valid. So, to make a valid point, the critic needs to prove that Christianity isnt what it claims to be.

As Copan notes, it can just as easily be the *critic* who is arrogant. Pluralists who reinterpret religious beliefs to suit their pluralism are in effect telling Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc., what it is they *really* believe. Like the king of Benares who knows that the blind men are really touching an elephant when they *think* they are touching a wall or a rope or something else, the pluralist believes he or she knows what all the adherents of the major world religions dont. The pluralist must have a view of truth that others dont. *That* is arrogance. [{11}](#)

Youve probably heard this objection to the exclusive claims of Christ: "If you grew up in India, youd be a Hindu." [{12}](#) The assertion is that we only believe what we do because thats the way we were brought up. This argument commits what is called the genetic fallacy. It tries to explain away a belief or idea based upon its source. But as Copan says, "What if we tell a Marxist or a conservative Republican that if he had been raised in Nazi Germany, he would have belonged to the Hitler Youth? He will probably agree but ask what your point is." [{13}](#) The same argument, in fact, could be turned back on the pluralist to explain *his* belief in pluralism! Copan quotes Alvin Plantinga who says, "Pluralism isnt and hasnt been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldnt have been a pluralist. Does it follow that he shouldnt be a pluralist. . . ?" [{14}](#) The pluralist, in todays relativistic climate, is just as apt to be going along with the beliefs of *his* culture. So why should we believe *him*?

The Uniqueness of Christ

The idea that Jesus is the only way to God has always been a stumbling block for non-Christians. Lets consider two specific objections stemming from this claim.

Even people who have made no commitment to Christ as Lord hold Him in very high regard. Jesus is usually at or near the top of lists of the greatest people who ever lived. But as odd as it seems, people find a way to categorize Jesus so that they can regard Him as one of the greatest humans ever to have lived while rejecting His central teachings! Thus, one way to deflect the Christian message isnt so much an outright rejection of the faith as it is a reduction of it. Thus, a slogan often heard is “Jesus is just like any other great religious leader.”[{15}](#)

One has to wonder, however, how a man can be considered only a great religious teacher (or to have a high level of “God-consciousness”, as some say) who made the kinds of claims Jesus did, or who did the works that He did. Consider the claims He made for Himself: that He could forgive sins, that He would judge the world, that He and the Father are one. None of the other great religious teachers made such claims. Furthermore, none of the others rose from the dead to give credence to what He taught.

A favorite objection to arguments for the deity of Christ is that Jesus never said, “I am God”.[{16}](#) But does the fact that there is no record of Him saying those exact words mean that He didnt see Himself as such?

What reasons do we have for believing Jesus was divine? Here are a few.[{17}](#) He claimed to have a unique relationship to the Father (John 20:17). He accepted the title “The Christ, the Son of the Blessed One” (Mark 14:61-62). He identified Himself with the Son of Man in Daniels prophecies who was understood to be the Messiah, the special one sent from God (Matt. 26:64,

Dan. 7:13). He spoke on His own authority as though Gods commands were His own (Mark 1:27). He claimed to forgive sins which is something only God can do (Mark 2:1-12). He called for devotion to *Himself*, not just to God (Matt. 10:34-39). He identified Himself with the "I Am" of the Old Testament (John 8:57-59). As Copan notes, "Jesus didnt need to explicitly assert his divinity because his words and deeds and self-understanding assumed his divine status."[\[18\]](#)

If this is so, why didnt Jesus plainly say, "I am God"? There are several possible reasons. First, He came to minister to the Jews first. Being so strongly monotheistic, they would have killed Jesus the first time He referred to Himself as God. Second, "God" is a term mostly reserved for the Father. It serves to highlight His authority even over the second Person of the Trinity. Third, Jesus humanity was just as important as His deity. To refer to Himself as God would have caused His deity to overshadow His humanity. Remember that the Incarnation was a new and strange thing. It was something that most people had to be eased into. Conclusion

Although Christians cant be expected to have satisfactory answers to all the possible objections people can throw our way, with a little study we can learn some sound responses to some of the clichéd objections of our day. Phrases little understood and tossed out in a knee-jerk fashion can still have a profound influence upon us. We need to recognize them and defuse them.

If you still think youd like more ammunition, get a copy of Paul Copans book. Youll be glad you did.

Notes

Paul Copan, *"True For You, But Not For Me": Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 21.

1. Ibid., 21.

2. Ibid., 24.
3. Ibid., 44.
4. Ibid., 46.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 47.
8. Ibid., 48.
9. Ibid., 78.
10. Ibid., 80.
11. Ibid., 82.
12. Ibid., 83.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 107-09.
15. Ibid., 115.
16. Ibid., 115-118.
17. Ibid., 119.

Faith and Reason

Are faith and reason friends or foes? Does faith in Christ require checking your brain at the door? This essay presents 3 positions on faith and reason, from Tertullian, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Friends or Foes?

One of the more intriguing aspects of the *Indiana Jones* film trilogy is its focus on religious themes. In the third installment, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is involved in a search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. As the film reaches its climax, Indy must go through three tests in order to reach the Grail. After overcoming the first two obstacles, the final test required Indy to “step out” in faith, even though he was on one side of a cavern that appeared to be thirty feet across, without any visible way to reach the other side. Following the instructions from his father’s diary, Indy stepped into the void, and to his amazement, his foot came down on solid ground. It turned out that there was a bridge across the cavern but because the rocky texture of the bridge perfectly matched the facing wall of the cavern, the bridge was invisible from Indy’s perspective.

According to this scene, and enforced by general opinion, religious faith and human reason are opposites. Indiana Jones simply could not understand how it was possible to reach the Grail without any visible means to do so; the implication is that his decision to step out was a forfeiture of his intellect. This idea that Christian faith is a surrender of our reasoning abilities is a common one in contemporary culture.

For many Christians, the scene that we’ve been discussing is a disturbing one. On the one hand, it is a moment of triumph. It

seems to lend credence to the importance of religious faith. Then again, it portrays faith as being a mindless exercise. Indiana Jones is an intellectual college professor who is interested in the Grail primarily as an historical artifact. His leap of faith goes against everything he stands for. This reveals a tension that has existed in the church for centuries. Is faith in Christ a surrender of the intellect? Is godly wisdom in complete opposition to what Scripture calls "worldly wisdom"? There are many who question whether the Christian should even expose himself to teaching that is not consistent with the Word of God. For example, it is a frightening prospect for many Christian parents to consider sending their children off to a secular college where the Christian faith is often ridiculed or condemned. Still others want their children to be challenged by a secular education. They consider it part of the Christian's missionary mandate to confront secular culture with their very presence. In their mind, the tendency of Christians to separate themselves from secular environments leads to an isolationist mentality that fails to reach the lost for Christ.

As we examine the relationship of faith and reason for the Christian in this discussion, there are several questions to keep in mind. Is there such a thing as Christian philosophy, or is philosophy primarily opposed to theology? Should believers read literature that is not explicitly religious, or should we only read Christian literature? What about secular music or films? How we view the relationship between faith and reason will reveal itself in how we answer these questions. We will try to shed light on these issues as we examine three distinctive positions that have been prominent throughout church history.

Earlier, we mentioned that in the popular film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy had to make a literal leap of faith. When he stepped into the "void" in order to reach the Grail, he was unable to see the pathway to the Grail, but his

“blind faith” was rewarded when it turned out that the pathway was hidden by an optical illusion. He did what most people would consider suicidal. But is this a true picture of religious faith? Is faith or religious belief irrational? In the next section we will look at the answer of Tertullian, a Christian apologist from the early church who has been accused of saying this very thing.

Tertullian's Dilemma

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christ sometime around the year A.D. 197. It was he who asked the famous questions, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What have heretics to do with Christians?” Tertullian's major distinction was to create a metaphorical contrast between Athens, the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem, the central locale of divine revelation. Tertullian was convinced that the Christian faith and human wisdom were polar opposites. It was his conviction that God had revealed His plan of salvation in Scripture alone; to mix Scripture with the philosophy of pagans could only distort God's message. But does this mean that Tertullian believed that human wisdom is irrational? Let's look at the evidence.

Contemporary theologians who deny the rationality of Christian belief often quote Tertullian's statement that the crucifixion should be believed because it is absurd. He also said the fact of the Resurrection is certain because it is impossible. But these statements must be understood from the context of Tertullian's own life and work. He himself utilized elements of Greek philosophy and logic that he believed to be compatible with Christian belief. The major emphasis in his writings was to contrast the coherence of Christianity with the inconsistency of his heretical opponents. When he does speak of the absurdity of Christian belief, he is actually referring to the unlikelihood that any human mind could conceive of God's redemptive plan. Like C. S. Lewis, he was

convinced of the truth of the gospel by the very fact that no human being could possibly concoct such a story as is presented in Scripture. Certainly the Jews could not; the claim of Christ that He was God in the flesh was blasphemous to many of them. Nor could the Greeks create such a story; for them, the material world was inferior to the divine realm. God could not possibly assume human flesh in their philosophical reasoning. But for Tertullian, this was compelling evidence that the gospel is true! The religious and philosophical systems contemporary with the advent of Christianity would have prevented any human from simply making up such a fantastic tale. He concluded that the gospel had to originate in the mind of God himself.

To conclude, let's put Tertullian in the shoes of Indiana Jones. What would Tertullian do if faced with the prospect of crossing over the invisible bridge? My guess is that he would see such a step as consistent with God's way of directing His people. The key to understanding Tertullian's view of faith and reason is to consider what the unbeliever would think. Since most unbelievers would consider what Indiana Jones did as unreasonable, he would probably consider such an attitude as compelling proof that the person of faith must take such a step.

Tertullian, the early church apologist, was convinced that belief in the Scripture was the basis for the Christian life. He also considered Greek philosophy to be the basis for heresy in the Church. Unfortunately, he seemed to assume that all Christians intuitively understood Scripture in the same way. His motto might have been "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." But it is one thing to believe; it is another thing to understand what we believe. Next, we will consider the ideas of Augustine, who is known by the phrase "faith seeking understanding."

Augustine's Solution

Augustine, who died in the year A.D. 430, recounts in his famous *Confessions* how as a young man he was constantly seeking for a philosophy that would be consistent and guide him to truth. At one point he abandoned any hope in his search and became a skeptic. But at the age of 33, Augustine came to accept the truth of the gospel. He recognized that the speculation of Greek philosophy was incapable in itself of bringing him to salvation. But, on the other hand, he could see that it had prepared him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and laid the groundwork by which he came to accept the claims of Christ. Augustine believed that the Scripture was the authoritative Word of God, but in interpreting difficult scriptural concepts such as the Trinity, he found it necessary to utilize his own philosophical training to explain the teaching of Scripture.

Whereas Tertullian considered faith in Christ's revelation of himself to be the only thing worth knowing, Augustine emphasized both the priority of faith and its incompleteness without the help of reason. One of his great insights is that faith is the foundation for all knowledge. Christians are often ridiculed for their faith, as if "faith" and "gullibility" were synonyms. But Augustine reminds us that each of us must trust some authority when making any truth claim, and that "faith" and "trust" are synonyms.

Consider a few examples: Christians and non-Christians alike agree that water freezes at zero degrees centigrade. However, I myself have never performed that experiment; I simply trust what reliable scientific studies have confirmed. Likewise, no one living today was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but all Americans celebrate that day as having been July 4, 1776. We trust the witness of those who were actually there. In other words, our knowledge *begins* with faith in some authority, just as Augustine emphasized.

But Augustine distinguished himself from Tertullian by acknowledging that philosophy does have a role in how the Christian understands God's revelation. Because humanity is made in the image of God, we are all capable of knowing truth. Augustine found in pagan philosophy helpful ideas that enabled him to elaborate God's Word. But it must be emphasized that his interest in pagan philosophy was not an end in itself, but rather a tool by which to grasp more deeply the meaning of Scripture.

What would Augustine have done if he had faced the choice of Indiana Jones? First, he would have needed scriptural support for such a choice. Secondly, he would have considered the logic of such a decision. Whereas Tertullian considered God's mind to be contrary to the philosophies of man, Augustine believed God created us to think His thoughts after Him. His was a reasonable faith. This is why his motto has been described as "faith seeking understanding."

The Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas

Now we turn to look at the teaching of the twelfth-century scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose own slogan has been called, "I understand in order to believe."

A good way to get a handle on Thomas's position is to recognize that his own motto is a reversal of Augustine's *faith seeking understanding*. It was Augustine who first explained the concept of *original sin*, which states that we are alienated from God at birth because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam. Thomas agreed that our moral conformity to God had been lost, but he believed that sin had not completely corrupted our intellect. Thomas believed, therefore, that we could come to a basic knowledge of God without any special revelation. This is not to say that Thomas did not hold a high view of Scripture. Scripture was authoritative for Thomas. But he seemed to believe that divine revelation is a fuller explanation of what we are able to know

about God on our own. For example, his attempts to prove the existence of God were based on the aftereffects of God's action in the world, such as the creation, rather than in the sure Word of Scripture. In contrast to Tertullian and Augustine, who placed faith in God's revelation of Christ as the foundation for knowledge, Thomas started with human reason and philosophy. His hope was to show that even people who reject the Scripture could come to believe in God through the use of their intellects. But the Scriptures were necessary since the human mind cannot even conceive of concepts such as the Trinity.

Thomas lived at a time when most of Aristotle's philosophy was first being introduced into the Latin language. This created quite a stir in the universities of the day. Up until that time, Augustine's emphasis on an education centered on Scripture was the dominant view. Thomas himself was educated in the tradition of Augustine, but he appreciated the philosophy of Aristotle as a witness to the truth. He found Aristotle to be more balanced in his approach to philosophy than Augustine had been. Whereas Augustine emphasized the eternal realm in his own philosophy, Aristotle's philosophy confirmed the importance of the natural world as well and assisted Thomas in his effort to create a comprehensive Christian philosophy which recognized that the material world was important because it had been created by God and was the arena in which His redemptive plan was to be fulfilled. Prior to Thomas, the tendency had been to downplay the physical world as greatly inferior to the spiritual world.

If we were to place Thomas in the shoes of Indiana Jones, it is likely that he would have stepped out as well. But he would have arrived at the decision for different reasons than Tertullian or Augustine. Because of his emphasis on the thinking ability of the human race and his emphasis on physical reality, he might have knelt down on the ground and felt for the hidden pathway before actually stepping out.

Since he leaned toward utilizing reason and his own understanding to discover the bridge, he would not have depended solely on revelation to cross over like the others.

We will conclude our series as we evaluate the implications of the three different views of faith and reason that we have been examining in this discussion.

Implications

We have been examining three distinctive positions on the question of faith and reason. Basically, we have been attempting to discern whether or not human reason, as expressed in pagan philosophy, is a help or a hindrance to Christian theology.

The first position we addressed was that of Tertullian, who viewed the combination of divine revelation and Greek philosophy as the root of all false teaching in the church. We then showed that even though Augustine agreed with Tertullian that faith in divine revelation is primary for the Christian, they differed in that Tertullian emphasized *belief in* the Scriptures, while Augustine focused on the *understanding* of what one believes. That is why he was willing to incorporate pagan philosophy to help further his understanding of Christian theology. He was delighted to find pagans whose philosophy, though not Christian in and of itself, was in some way compatible with Christianity.

The third and final position we examined was that of Thomas Aquinas, who believed that all people could have a basic knowledge of God purely through natural reason. He did not agree with Augustine that the human mind had been totally corrupted by sin at the Fall. This belief led to his elevation of the power of the mind and his appreciation of philosophy. Theology is the higher form of wisdom, but it needs the tools of science and philosophy in order to practice its own trade. Theology learns from philosophy, because ultimately theology

is a human task.

How we view the relationship between faith and reason can have powerful implications for how the Christian engages society with the gospel. One of the problems with the apologetics of Tertullian is that he seemed to view all that opposed him to be enemies of the gospel, rather than as potential converts. This is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, when he proclaimed the gospel among the Greeks at Mars Hill. He did not condemn them for their initial failure to accept the Resurrection. Instead, he attempted to reach common ground with them by quoting some of their own philosophers, picking out isolated statements from pagan thinkers which were consistent with Scripture, while still maintaining the absolute truth of Scripture as his foundation. In this way, he was able to gain a hearing with some of his listeners. But this presupposes some familiarity with pagan thought. This familiarity made Paul a more effective witness to his audience.

Paul's attitude toward pagan philosophy seems to be consistent with those of Augustine and Aquinas. All three felt it was beneficial to know what the non-believer thought in order to communicate the gospel. How then can believers apply this attitude today without compromising their values? Perhaps it involves Christian parents listening with their children to the music they enjoy, and then constructively discussing its message. After all, many contemporary musicians utilize their music to proclaim their own philosophies of life. Or maybe it will mean watching a popular movie that has taken the country by storm, with the goal of discerning its importance to the average viewer. Rather than criticizing literature, philosophy, film, or music that is not explicitly Christian, we may find that by attempting to appreciate their value or worth, no matter how meager, we may be better able to dialogue with, and confront, our post-Christian culture with the claims of Christ.

Cruci-Fiction and Resuscitation

A paid advertisement in a campus newspaper declaring Christ's resurrection a hoax was deeply disturbing to its readers. This essay raises 9 problems with the ad and answers them.

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



The title used above was the headline of a paid advertisement in a campus newspaper from a major university. Allegedly written by a university student named "Daniel," the ad appeared as a result of Resurrection Week on that campus in the spring of 1997.

I received a copy of the ad in a letter from a long-time friend of my son. He was angry, confused, and scared by the article. He opened his letter by saying, "This is one of the most upsetting articles that I have ever read. This paid advertisement' has contradicted everything that I believe in. It makes a mockery out of the way I have chosen to pattern my life. It even frightens me."

In this essay we are going to address the misleading statements and half-truths found in the article. A few days after receiving this correspondence, I took the article and broke it down into nine significant errors or issues raised by the author. My procedure will be quote each half-truth or misleading statement, then address it.

I do not presume that this brief treatment will completely

answer all of the objections raised by the “paid advertisement,” but these thoughts were a great help to my son’s friend as he took a deeper look at his faith. I trust that they will be equally helpful to you.

Christian Scholars and the Bible

Problem #1

“Have you ever wondered why so many biblical experts are so skeptical about Jesus’ resurrection’ and why even a growing number of Christian scholars and theologians are heard saying that his resurrection is not so central to Christianity” (“Cruci-fiction”).

It appears that Daniel is only interested in going to those “biblical experts” and “Christian scholars” that support his position. It is no secret that there are a number of Christian scholars who hold a low view of the Bible and the deity of Christ, i.e., they do not believe in the veracity or trustworthiness of the Scriptures or the deity of Christ.

They very often question not only the deity of Christ and His resurrection, but also the Trinity, His uniqueness as a Savior, and His second coming. They also tend to discount hell as a place for eternal damnation and consider sin as only a mistake. They see guilt as being of no consequence because it is imposed on humanity by those who would enforce a strict moral code of conduct.

Daniel’s comment about Christian scholars and theologians not considering the resurrection of Jesus being of any real importance is a ridiculous notion that denigrates the uniqueness of Jesus and ultimately places Him on the same plane as Buddha, Krishna, or any other “holy man” in history. Jesus is totally unique and that distinct difference is based on His resurrection in bodily form. Without the Resurrection, there is no salvation for we are still in our sin.

Next, we will look at Daniel's assumption that there were tens and possibly hundreds of "gospels" in existence at the time the church selectively chose the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a basis for understanding God's truth, along with his assertion that the Apostle Paul fabricated these writings to alter the truth.

Numerous Gospels

Problem #2

Now we are going to look at the question of the canon: just where did the Bible come from and how can we know that it is trustworthy?

Our antagonist, Daniel, continues by making this statement:

"Since preachers have often failed to inform the people of what really happened in events surrounding the so called resurrection,' I will make an attempt to give the most possible accurate picture. Our information source will be the four surviving gospels even though they have been carefully selected by the Church from a pool of a multitude of gospels' tens, possibly hundreds. . . . The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" ("Cruci-fiction").

There is no doubt that there were a number of "gospels" circulating during and after the first century. But, Daniel's problem is that he does not have an understanding of how the Bible was canonized. There were several ways various writings were judged to be authentic. If they failed in any one area, they were suspect overall.

First, for a gospel or other book to be considered authentic by the early church, the author must have been an Apostle, one who had been with Jesus during His ministry.

Remember that Jesus promised His disciples the Holy Spirit

would enable them to remember His teachings so that they could communicate them accurately to others. He said to the Apostles, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 16:25-26). Jesus, who is absolutely reliable, believed that what the disciples wrote about Him would be just as true as if He wrote it Himself. That means that it would be historically accurate.

Second, the book had to be authoritative. Did it come from the hand of God? The previous passage indicates that a genuine message from God would come through the Holy Spirit.

Third, is it prophetic? Was it written by a man of God?

Fourth, is it authentic? When in doubt about a manuscript, the Church fathers threw it out.

Fifth, is it dynamic? Did it contain the life-transforming power of God?

Sixth, was the book received and used by the people and considered to be authentic and authoritative?

Daniel uses Irenaeus as a source for the idea of tens, even hundreds, of possible gospels circulating in the first century and subtly implies that he (Irenaeus) questioned their authenticity out of hand. However, we know that Irenaeus, according to historical documentation, gave credence to the four Gospels of the Bible.

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had been a Christian for eighty-six years, and was a disciple of John the Apostle. Irenaeus wrote the following regarding the four Gospels of the New Testament:

So firm is the ground upon which the Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting

from these (documents), each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine. For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit (Against Heresies III).

It seems as if Irenaeus would probably differ with Daniel on this count.

The latter part of Daniel's statement, "The four surviving gospels were edited and corrected over time to best fit the doctrines worked out earlier by Paul" holds no water as well.

Daniel makes it seem that Paul was the official editor of the New Testament and that nothing made the canon unless he approved of its inclusion.

Daniel seems to overlook the fact that the books of the Bible were decided upon by Church Councils and not individuals. Plus, there is an overwhelming amount of manuscript evidence to help the inquiring student to recognize that there was no wholesale editing of the Gospels. (For more information on this, see the Probe article [Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](#))

Remember these manuscripts were being used daily by the Church and those using the Scripture were contemporaries of Paul. If, in fact, he had edited or distorted the writings of the Apostles, he would have had his hand called (see Acts 17:10-11) and would have been ostracized. The fact is, it didn't happen.

Crucifixion and Prophecies

Problem #3 Next, our antagonist, Daniel, questions the fact that Jesus really died on the cross and makes this statement regarding the event.

“In order to speed up death of the crucified , he ordered the soldiers to break the legs of both criminals, but not those of Jesus” (“Cruci-fiction”).

It appears that Daniel is not familiar with prophecy and, in particular, those prophecies relating to Jesus’ death. Psalms 34:20 says, “He keeps all his bones; Not one of them is broken.” The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in John 19:33 where it is said, “But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.”

The Romans were not novices when it came to crucifixion and death. They knew a dead person when they saw one. It seems that Daniel cannot accept this possibility.

Problem #4

“But one soldier thrust a lance into his side. How can one see that a person is dead without a careful close inspection of signs of life as heartbeat and breathing? How many times are people pulled from water, fires, car wrecks who appear to be dead, but then are resurrected?’ And if the soldier saw that Jesus was dead, why the lancing? No reason for it.

“Moreover, Romans never lanced the crucified. If the soldier did not get special orders from Pilate and if he was only a bit suspicious that Jesus was alive (as he had all reasons to be), he would have broken Jesus’ legs like anyone else’s, no preferential treatment. It seems that the lancing (was) observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness” (“Cruci-fiction”).

Once again Daniel is allowing his bias to overtake his lack of understanding of the prophecies surrounding the Crucifixion

Zechariah 12:10 says, "They will look on me whom they have pierced."

John 19:34 offers the fulfillment of this prophecy. It reads, "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear."

Daniel is caught up with the notion that Jesus did not die on the cross, but seemed to have fainted and was resuscitated at a later time, thereby ignoring some basic facts regarding the death of Christ. There is no record that any of the onlookers questioned the fact of Jesus' death; also the centurion gave testimony of the death of Jesus to Pilate (Mark 15:44).

Furthermore, the piercing of His side confirmed that Jesus was indeed dead. But, equally important is the fact that from the wound came both blood and water. John 19:34 35 gives us an eyewitness account of the effect of the piercing. We read that blood and water poured from the wound, but had Jesus been alive at the time of the piercing, strong spurts of blood would have come forth with every heartbeat. Instead, we are told that a semi-dark red clot was seeping out and was separate from a flow of watery serum. These signs are evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries and, therefore, proof of death.

Problem #5

Next in our analysis of Christ's crucifixion, we are going to deal with several problems about which our antagonist, Daniel, attempts to create doubt. In doing so, we catch Daniel using poor logic to make his case against the Resurrection.

Daniel continues by observing that the lancing of Jesus was *"observed only by a mysterious anonymous witness which appears only in John's gospel (and) was the author's initiative to correct the previously written three gospels which did not*

document any such lancing (“Cruci-fiction”).

Each of the gospel writers had different interests: Matthew was a tax-collector; Mark was the son of Mary and close to the Apostles; Luke was a physician; and John was a fisherman. Each of these men likewise had a different perspective in their Gospel narrative. Luke, although he was a physician, wrote his Gospel as a historical account. John offers the reader no account of the birth of Jesus, His baptism, or His temptations; it tells us nothing of the Last Supper, nothing of Gethsemane, and nothing of the Ascension, to name just a few omissions.

However, if we are to use Daniel’s logic we would have to discount all these facts because they were not mentioned in all four Gospels that “survived the editing of Paul.”

Genealogies of Christ

Problem #6

“When Matthew and Luke were independently editing the earlier Mark’s gospel, they knew that its contemporary critics pointed out that the Messiah must come from David’s line and Mark did not mention Jesus’ genealogy. So each made up his own list of names” (“Cruci-fiction”).

Here, Daniel seems to be a bit lazy. Instead of doing a little research to gain an understanding of Jesus’ lineage, he simply makes the comment that each writer just made it up to suit his own wishes.

In Judaism a man’s lineage was his pedigree. It was a matter of high regard for a Jew to have direct lineage from Abraham, thereby proving his Jewishness. The Gospel writers had different reasons for including Jesus’ pedigree.

As Daniel points out, the genealogies given by Matthew and Luke are quite different. There are several possibilities for

this occurrence.

Luke includes the genealogy between Adam and Abraham. The section between Abraham and David is the same in both Matthew and Luke. However, the genealogies between David and Joseph are almost completely different. Why is this?

One school of thought is that both genealogies are symbolic and that Matthew gives us the line of royal descent of Jesus and Luke gives us the line of priestly descent.

Another school of thought is that one genealogy (Matthew's) gives Christ's ancestral line from Abraham through Joseph (Jesus' legal father, though not His natural one) establishing Jesus' legal right to the throne of David. This fits the Jewishness of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part of this approach is that the genealogy in Luke traces Jesus' ancestry from Mary (Jesus' physical mother) back to Adam (physical father of the human race). (There are some minor concerns about the spelling of some names in this genealogy, but this seems to be the best answer.) It is also very compatible with the universal character of the book of Luke.

The fact is that we do not fully know which genealogical approach is more correct. However, we do know that genealogies were extremely important to the Jews and the idea of making them up is preposterous and would have been exposed.

Our next discussion will center on the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, but only swooned.

Burial of Christ

Problem #7

"Thus Jesus was taken off the cross after approximately three hours by Joseph of Arimathea and was buried on his property in his new tomb that he (Joseph) had hewn in the rock." Why there? Why didn't Joseph bury Jesus in the ground as most

people were buried, but instead he put him into his own tomb? Because in the ground Jesus would have certainly suffocated. Moreover, Joseph knew that he would be able to reuse the tomb in the future" ("Cruci-fiction").

It is true that the Romans normally buried those who were crucified in a pit unless the body was claimed. The body of Jesus was not claimed by a family member or by one of the disciples. They were evidently too scared and feared the possible outcome of doing so. It was Joseph of Arimathea who desired a more appropriate resting place for the body of the Lord.

Joseph realized that he had to move quickly in order to accomplish his goal of burial because the Sabbath was close. There was no time for elaborate preparations, and Joseph did what any other believer would have done he made his newly hewn sepulcher available to our Lord.

The tomb was in close proximity to Golgotha and spared Joseph and Nicodemus the trouble of preparing a burial site along with the need to prepare the body.

Problem #8

"What would you do in Joseph's place knowing Jesus had only been on the cross three hours and had not had his legs broken? Exactly what Joseph did. Once dark settled, he took several of his servants and unrolled the stone to get Jesus out. According to all expectations, Jesus was alive, so Joseph got him out and rolled the stone back. Only the next day did the Pharisees realize their mistake and asked Pilate to guard the tomb, by which time Jesus was resting in Joseph's house" ("Cruci-fiction").

On the surface this argument sounds plausible. However, it does not take into account the fact that Joseph fully believed and recognized that Jesus was indeed dead. If he were to follow through, as Daniel suggests, by removing the stone and

taking Jesus to his home for recuperation, he would have been directly disobeying Jewish law.

Jewish law prohibited a Jew from working on the Sabbath. They had very strict ideas about what comprised work. It is highly unlikely that Joseph would have risked the penalty for breaking the Sabbath for removing a body that he believed was dead. For what purpose? To risk the penalty of death for breaking the Sabbath?

According to scholars, the stone that was placed at the entrance of the tomb was not only larger than what would normally be used, but one that would take twenty men to move. Beyond the above, if Joseph did return with twenty men to remove the stone and release Jesus, it would be most unlikely that it could have been kept secret. It is untenable to think that such a conspiracy would have succeeded.

Likewise, it is ludicrous to suggest that after the Roman guard was posted and the tomb sealed, that evidence of tampering—should someone be so foolhardy as to try it—would have escaped the notice of the highly trained Roman soldiers. They knew the penalty for failure was death.

Problem #9

“Next we are told that after Sabbath was over women came to the tomb. Why? To anoint the body with spices as Mark 16:1 says? No! It is not a Jewish custom to open graves and anoint corpses which have already been buried and which have been fermenting for two days!” (“Cruci-fiction”).

Here Daniel is correct. However he does not take into account the special circumstances under which Jesus was interred.

Under normal conditions a body would have been properly prepared with ample time in which to complete the task. Joseph and Nicodemus had very little time to accomplish their duty before the Sabbath restrictions were imposed. The women

sitting at the preparation site saw that the process was incomplete according to their custom and subsequently desired to prepare the body in the proper way. Therefore, they made plans to return after the Sabbath and finish the process by anointing the body with sweet spices, nard, or some costly unguent.

Perhaps the most damaging piece of information to Daniel's hypothesis is the fact that the grave clothes were left undisturbed in the place where the body was laid. The body of Jesus was wrapped from the armpits to the ankles with strips of linen twelve inches wide. The linen wraps were then wound around the body placing spices, aloes, and other fine ointments between the wraps. It is believed that a minimum of seventy pounds of spices were used in the process and as much as a hundred pounds were used for someone of Jesus' position.

The grave clothes constituted quite a mass encasing the body. If we are to assume Daniel's position that Joseph and several of his servants took the body, we would expect that they were concerned about being detected. Therefore, they would have likely been in a great hurry, and we should expect that the grave clothes would have been left in great disarray with spices trailing out the doorway, not to mention that it would have been difficult to have placed the grave clothes neatly back on the resting place in the dark while being in a great hurry to do so.

However, the observers did not find spices and wrappings trailing out of the doorway. The grave clothes were intact, undisturbed with the exception of the head napkin that was placed slightly above where it should have been found.

John R. W. Stott in his book, *Basic Christianity*, makes this observation: "The body had disappeared. It would have vaporized, being transmuted into something new and different and wonderful. It would have passed through the grave clothes, as it was later to pass through closed doors, leaving them

untouched and almost undisturbed. For the body clothes, under the weight of one hundred pounds of spices, once support of the body had been removed, would have subsided or collapsed, and would now be lying flat.”

The grave clothes represent an undeniable fact: Jesus was not bodily or physically removed from their bondage, but He was indeed raised, transmuted from them in the glorious act of the Resurrection.

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Learning About God

The God Who Would Be Known

Recently my wife and I took a few hours off to visit a local nature preserve. You know how quiet and peaceful that can be. Imagine you're out there in nature enjoying your walk, and talking with . . . God. That's what Adam and Eve did, wasn't it?

We don't walk and talk with God the same way Adam and Eve did, but the God of the universe Who holds our very existence in His hand wants to show Himself to us as well; He wants us to know Him. He not only wants us to *know* Him, though; He wants us to know *about* Him.

Sometimes Christians will say they don't need a lot of doctrine; they just want to know God personally, to just *experience* Him, without complicating things by adding all that theological gobbledy-gook. With a little bit of reflection, however, one can see how important knowing *about* God is to *knowing* God.

If my wife were to try to talk to me about her interests or desires or anything about herself, and I were to say, "You know, dear, I hate to get confused with all that information. I just want to *experience* your presence; I just want to *relate* to you personally," you might understand if she experienced some confusion! What does it mean to "know" someone in our experience without knowing things *about* the person? The most it could mean is that I just want the feelings that come with being near someone I love.

My own joy in her presence, however, rests on certain knowledge about her. How much joy would any of us experience in the presence of, say, a known axe-murderer?! It's amazing what a little knowledge can do for one's "experience!"

Resisting any knowledge about my wife would also indicate that I don't really have much interest in her; I'm only concerned with *myself* and *my* experience. What greater way is there to let someone know you really care and are interested than to want to learn about him or her?

Have I convinced you of the need to know *about* God in order to truly *know* God? If so, I hope you'll invest some time in studying theology. You needn't read a massive work on systematic theology. A writer whose work I'm benefiting from is Alister McGrath. He's a well-respected theologian who makes theology accessible for the layperson. R.C. Sproul and J. I. Packer are two others from whose writings you would benefit. In fact, Packer's popular book, *Knowing God*, would be a great place to start.

You might still be hesitant because you know that it's possible to substitute the "knowing about" for the "knowing personally." How can we let what we know about God feed our personal knowledge of Him? Listen to this suggestion from J. I. Packer: "The rule for doing this is demanding but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise

to God.” [\(1\)](#)

In this essay we'll just touch on a few subjects of importance in knowing about God: revelation; the Trinity; God's sovereignty; and idolatry. I hope this will be helpful to you as you continue the wonderful journey of knowing God.

The God Who Can Be Known

In a debate on the existence of God between Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland and atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen, Nielsen argued that, for the educated person, “it is irrational to believe in God.” [\(2\)](#) Why? Because there is nothing in our experience to refer to when we say “God” that gives meaning to the word. If we want to argue, for example, that a certain table exists, we can point to the table or we can describe it in terms we understand. Since we can't point to God and we can't understand what God is in Himself, we can't talk about Him meaningfully, Nielsen says.

So, where does this leave Christians? Does it leave us with an irrational faith? *Can* we know about God? If so, *how* so?

We are able to know God because of revelation. *Revelation* means “disclosure.” As New Testament scholar Leon Morris says, “Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover.” [\(3\)](#) The last book of the Bible is called *Revelation* because it reveals the plans of God which were otherwise unknowable.

Revelation is necessary because of the nature of God. He can't be seen by us (Jn. 1:18; I Tim. 6:16; I Jn. 4:12); we can't know his depths or His limits, Zophar told Job (Job 11:7; cf. Rom. 11:33); and no one knows His thoughts except the Spirit (I Cor. 2:11). Jesus said, “No one knows the Father except the

Son and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Mt. 11:27). Thus, if God and His ways are to be known, they must be revealed by Him to us. As Deut. 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever. . ."

How has God revealed Himself to us? Rom. 1:20 says that we know God exists through what He has made (i.e., nature). We see the hand of God in the historical events recorded in the Old Testament, such as the Exodus and the establishment of Israel and the regathering of God's people under Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ps. 9:16; 77:14; Eze. 20:9). Our own conscience bears witness through a knowledge of moral law (Rom. 2:15). God has made Himself known specially through Jesus and through the written Word of God (Jn. 15:15; Mt. 11:27). Recall Heb. 1:1,2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son."

Through revelation we know of God's glory (Is. 40:5), His righteousness (Is. 56:1), and His righteous judgment (Rom. 2:5). We know His plans (cf. Dan. 2:28,29; Eph. 3:3-6) and what He desires of us (cf. Micah 6:8). Even the message of the Gospel is referred to as a mystery now made known (Mt. 13:35; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:3-6).

If atheists like Prof. Nielsen refuse to acknowledge the reality of God, that doesn't negate what we know to be true. *Our* belief in God doesn't depend upon the confirmation of others. Besides, God has made Himself known in a tangible way in Jesus as well as in nature, history, conscience and Scripture. At the day of judgment, those who rely upon the excuse "Not enough evidence!" will be in for an awful surprise. God has revealed Himself, and we can know Him.

The Trinity

There's probably no more baffling doctrine taught in Scripture

than that of the Trinity. Christians say that God is three in one. How can that be? How can there be one God, and yet we name three persons— Father, Son, and Spirit—as God?

Attempts have been made to find some comparison in our own experience that can make this truth understandable, but they all fail at some point. Some say the Trinity might be like steam, water and ice—three forms which H₂O takes. But this analogy fails because the same quantity of H₂O doesn't assume all three forms at one time. The analogy of an egg also fails because the three components—yolk, white and shell—are completely different. God isn't three separate parts in one unit. The Bible teaches that there is only one God, and that He is unified in His being. It also teaches that there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, distinct from one another, all existing at the same time. One being, three persons. A mystery, for sure, but not a contradiction.

Theologian Alister McGrath offers a helpful illustration. If a scientist takes a sample of air for some kind of testing, he has real *air* in his sample but not *all* of the air. He just has a sample, but he expects that what can be found in the rest of the air can be found in the sample; they are identical in nature. As McGrath says, "Jesus allows us to sample God."[\(4\)](#) When people saw Jesus, they saw God. This is a better illustration, but it still isn't perfect.

Is this doctrine important? As McGrath notes, it is the foundational reality underlying our belief that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (II Cor. 5:19). God could reach out to us effectively because He reached out Himself. It was God in Christ who acted on our behalf; it wasn't some mere human emissary who brought us a good word from God. And it is the Holy Spirit—God again—who continues to minister in us while we wait for the glory which is to come.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn't only a difficulty for Christians: it's also a favorite target of critics who seek to

undermine our faith by finding flaws in it. Apart from the logical question of how one God can be three persons, critics also point to the fact that it was centuries after Christ that the doctrine was formulated. They say it was an invention of the church.

It shouldn't seem surprising that there was a delay in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. As noted earlier, it's the theological explanation of the teaching that was present from the beginning, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." As the church came under attack and as Christians thought through scriptural teaching, they gradually developed fuller and more sophisticated doctrines. They weren't making up new beliefs; they were more fully explaining what they already believed.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a necessary component of Christian belief. Any description of God which doesn't include all that this doctrine includes is inadequate. Far from being theologically burdensome, the doctrine of the Trinity is an essential part of Christianity.

The Sovereignty of God

Along with the doctrine of the Trinity, an issue that is equally baffling is that of God's sovereignty and man's free will. The Bible indicates that God is fully in control of this universe, yet it also makes clear that we have real freedom. Our decisions are significant. Our prayers, for example, do make a difference. How can we be free and our actions be meaningful while God determines the course of history?

In recent years a view of God called the "open view" has gained a hearing among evangelicals. According to this view, "God does not control everything that happens." [\(5\)](#) God often changes His plans to meet the changing situation brought about by our decisions and actions. As one writer says, "God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; .

. . history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.”(6) Among other things, this means that God doesn’t know everything that is going to happen in the future; He is learning as we are.(7)

What do we learn from Scripture about this subject? First, we learn that God is unchanging in His being and perfections or attributes. In Malachi 3:6 God says “For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.” James tells us that in God “there is no variation or shifting shadow.” (Jam. 1:17)

Second, we learn that God is unchanging in His purposes. “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation,” says Ps. 33:11. In Is. 46:9-11 God says clearly that what He has planned from long ago He will bring about.

Third, we learn that God knows the future already. Is. 46:10 says He “[declares] the end from the beginning.”

While acknowledging God’s control of history leading to His own ends, we must also acknowledge that He does respond to our actions and petitions. In Gen. 6 we read that God was “grieved in His heart” that He had made man, so He acted to wipe out everyone except Noah and his family. In Numbers 14 we read of a time when God said He would wipe out the Israelites, but He relented after Moses interceded for the people.

What are we to make of this? As writer Mark Hanna has noted, we tend to make adjustments in our theology to compensate for this tension between God’s sovereignty and our free will. To do this, however, only creates problems elsewhere in our theology. What we must do is leave the tension where the Bible does.(8)

Why is the reality of God’s sovereign control important? It’s because God is unchanging in His being that we can trust Him to be “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

It's because God has knowledge of the future which is settled that predictive prophecy is possible. It's because God knows in advance what people will do that he isn't blind-sided by evil. Thus we can trust Him to know what is ahead of us; our future is ultimately in His hands, not the hands of people.

Although some people have theological problems with this, for others the problem might be personal. In other words, maybe we just don't like the idea that anyone else—even God—has ultimate control over us. For those who are truly and joyfully submitted to God, however, the doctrine of God's sovereignty and complete foreknowledge is a source of comfort, not of annoyance.

A Jealous God

In Isaiah 44 we read about a man who makes an idol from a tree. Part of the tree he worships; he calls on it to deliver him. The other part he burns for cooking and for warming himself. Isaiah 44:19 shows the ridiculousness of what he is doing with these words:

No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!"

Idolatry is setting something up in place of God. Paul sums it up in one simple phrase: "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25). Those things to which we devote ourselves and which end up ruling our lives, thus taking precedence over God, become our idols.

Writer Richard Keyes speaks of nearby idols which give us a sense of control over our lives, things as ordinary as a clean house or even a stamp collection. Keyes also speaks about

faraway idols, those things that give a sense of meaning to our lives such as financial security or progress in science. Nearby idols give us an immediate sense of security; they're substitutes for the immanent activity of God in our lives. Faraway idols give us a sense of purpose and meaning; in them we put our hope. They are substitutes for the transcendent rule of God over our world. [\(9\)](#)

In response to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, God often revealed Himself to be a jealous God. "They have made Me jealous with what is not God," He said. "They have provoked Me to anger with their idols" (Deut. 32:21). Why would God respond this way? Because first, God deserves all glory, for all good things come from Him (Jam. 1:17). And second, because created things can't do what God can and wants to do for us. In Is. 42 we read: "Thus says God the Lord, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. . . . 'I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.'" (42:5-8). He is the creator and life-giver. There is no one and nothing like Him.

In contrast to this, idols are created, they aren't eternal, and they are incapable of providing what we really need. Theologian Carl Henry brings to mind Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al when he refers to idols as "the false gods who never show." [\(10\)](#) Ba'al couldn't respond to his prophets no matter how much they shouted and danced and prayed (I Ki. 18:17-40). As the psalm writer said, "They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see" (115:5). The problem is that idols by nature are not gods at all (Jer. 2:11; 5:7; Acts 19:26; Gal. 4:8). Thus it is that when such things as money or power or athletic prowess become our idols, we find that they cannot deliver us from everything that would destroy us.

We began this essay talking about the God Who would be known.

To set up an idol in His place is to reject what He has told us about Himself and His desires. Today there are many other gods which call for our allegiance. We must continually recommit ourselves to the One Who won't share His glory with others.

Notes

1. James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 18.
2. J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 48.
3. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 10.
4. Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 205.
5. Pinnock, Clark, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Ibid., 16.
8. Mark Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 59-60.
9. Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," in *No God But God: Breaking With the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 37-48.
10. Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1966), 5.

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

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



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

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

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

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

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

mind.”{1}

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

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

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

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

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were “May God never abandon me!”[\[6\]](#)

The Human Condition

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

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God’s image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

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

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

Pascal says it’s important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says “it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it.” Thus, our message must be that “there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature

which renders them unworthy of Him.”{8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

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

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

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

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn't it? But the attitude people take is this:

Just as I do
Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going.

All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me.[{11}](#)

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

Knowledge of the Heart

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

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

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

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

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

For Pascal, the heart is “the ‘intuitive’ mind” rather than “the ‘geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”^{19} For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact,

reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.[{20}](#) Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

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

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

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

But God doesn’t remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. “If there were no obscurity,” Pascal says, “man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure.”[{25}](#)

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. “God is a hidden God,” says Pascal, “ and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only

through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him.*"[\[26\]](#) Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

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

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

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

a contrary disposition.”{29}

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

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal’s thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, “This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument.”{34}

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

Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have

only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

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

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the types of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine “which gives a reason for everything,” the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

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

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of

evidences in favor of it, "it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe," he says, " is the cross." At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: "Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."[{43}](#)

The Wager

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

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

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

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

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do

you expect me to do?"[{46}](#) After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

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

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.[{48}](#) By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

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

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

Summary

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

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, *Blaise Pascal* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, *Mind On First: A Faith for the*

Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.

6. Davidson, 22.

7. Houston, 91.

8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.

9. Kreeft, 187.

10. Houston, 96.

11. Ibid., 122.

12. Kreeft, 238.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 236.

15. Houston, 58.

16. Ibid., 58.

17. Ibid., 53.

18. Trotter, 50.

19. Kreeft, 228.

20. Ibid., 229.

21. Ibid., 238.

22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.

23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.

24. Kreeft, 247.

25. Ibid., 249.

26. Ibid., 251.

27. Houston, 147.

28. Ibid., 149.

29. Kreeft, 69.

30. Ibid., 232.

31. Houston, 130.

32. Kreeft, 240.

33. Houston, 223.

34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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Christian Psychology: Is Something Missing?

The Church as a Healing Community

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

offer the believer? This essay will consider only one small part of the answer to those questions.

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

Larry Crabb has done much to bring counseling into the American church. Having written books for more than 23 years, Crabb has always seen the church as being central in the counseling process. He has trained many of the counselors working in churches today. He has written books, taught, founded schools, and lectured around the country on Christian psychology. He has successfully questioned the church's distrust of psychology.

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

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

troubles and struggles we face in daily life?

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

What Is Connecting?

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

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

In this book, Larry Crabb calls this whole picture into

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

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

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

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

Connecting is so powerful, Crabb says, because it requires

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

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

What Keeps Us From Connecting?

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

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

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

God has created us with a desire for good. We want to please others, we want to live in peace, we want to have everything

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

Fire lighters are like those people described in Isaiah 50:10-11. They walk in darkness, but rather than trust in God to guide them by His light, they light their own torches, and set their own fires to see by. Fire lighters, Crabb says, are those people who must have a plan they know will work. Their demand of God is the pragmatist's "Tell me what will work!" Fire lighters trust and hold closely to their plans, so connecting is hard for them because it would require them to trust God and not know what might happen next. Connecting requires us to give up our plans and expectations so that we can recognize and enjoy God's plans. We can either trust God or trust our own plans, but we cannot do both. It is not wrong to plan, but we must be willing to give up our plans when Jesus does not fit into them in the way that we want. As C.S. Lewis describes Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: "It's not as if he were a tame Lion." [\(4\)](#)

Have you ever known people whose primary efforts in life were directed towards protecting themselves and their children from any difficulties? When safety is your top priority, then you have become a *wall whitewasher*, Crabb says. Wall whitewashers build flimsy walls of protection around themselves and their worlds, and then whitewash them to make them appear stronger

than they really are. These people want protection from whatever they fear. They are sure that their lives of dedication to the Lord are a protection from major problems. "Wall whitewashers cannot welcome tribulations as friends. . . Character isn't the goal of a wall whitewasher. Safety is." [\(5\)](#)

Many people who feel God's calling in their lives, also assume that God will take care of them and of their families. And He will, but not always in the way that we imagine. As we raise our children and watch the terrible struggles that seem to overcome so many other young people, we may feel that at least God will protect our own children from such affliction. But if our trust is that our serving the Lord is protecting our family, then we have built up a false sense of security. We are trying to cover our own uncertainty about the future with the whitewash of our own good deeds. God builds us up and shows us our need to depend on Him alone in our tribulations, but we often want to hide ourselves and protect our families from the very misfortunes that God wants to use to strengthen us. We are whitewashing a failing wall when we try to put up a hedge around ourselves and our families, sure that God will protect us from trouble. Everything that happens in our lives has come through God first, has been "Father-filtered," as someone once said. But we must depend on the Lord in all circumstances, not just when we feel protected. God loves us perfectly, but His desire is to give us His character, not to protect us from any difficulty. That is why, as James says, we are to greet tribulations as friends, and not with fear.

Crabb's fourth class of people who thwart God's purpose in connecting are those he calls *well diggers*. The image comes from Jeremiah 2, where God marvels at the broken, pitiful wells that the Israelites make instead of coming to Him for real, unlimited water. Well diggers are looking for satisfaction on their terms, and they want to escape pain at any cost. The well digger asks, "Do I feel fulfilled?" If the answer is no, then he renews his quest for something that will

give even a moment's pleasure. We judge drug addicts harshly, but what about needing to have a certain position to feel good, or driving a certain kind of car to prove we're reaching our goals?

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

God plans for eternity, and builds to last forever. But it takes time, and patience. If we fulfill our own desires, we will be like the Samaritan woman at the well: we will soon thirst again. But if we allow God to provide for our thirst, He fills us with living water, and we are filled in ways we could never have known otherwise.

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

Finding What God is Doing in Others

To connect with another believer, we "discover what God is up to and join Him in nourishing the life He has already given." [\(6\)](#) This is why Larry Crabb sees connecting as central to the Gospel. To connect with another Christian is to let the

power of the Holy Spirit in you, find the good that God has planted in the spirit of another believer. It requires us to get past our flesh, which Paul instructs us to crucify (Gal. 5:24), so that we can be alive to the Spirit, the one Who makes connection possible. Connecting with someone else is a triumph of the Spirit over my own fleshly desires to control my own life (being a city builder), to create a plan I know will work (fire lighter), to protect myself against the uncertainties of life (wall whitewasher), and to find my own ways to feel good when I want to (well digger). To connect with a fellow believer I must see what God sees in him or her, not just what I can see.

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

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

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

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

Discerning a Vision for Others

Larry Crabb’s book *Connecting* has two subtitles. The first subtitle is “Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships.” Earlier, we saw how we are healed as we allow Christ to sweep away all of our own methods of dealing with life. Whether we are city builders, fire lighters, wall whitewashers, or well diggers, these are all ways that we try to manage life. Jesus does not ask us to manage our lives. Instead, as a father might take his son through a crowded mall, God asks us to take His hand, and let Him guide us to where He chooses. The urges we need to kill are the very urges that whisper in our ears that we must take care of ourselves.

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

creations, just as He is doing for us.

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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