Why We Shouldn't Hate Philosophy: A Biblical Perspective

Michael Gleghorn examines the role of philosophy in a Christian worldview. Does philosophy help us flesh our our biblical perspective or does it just confuse our understanding?

A Walk on the Slippery Rocks

For many people in our culture today, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians got it right: "Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks." But for some in the Christian community, they didn't go far enough. Philosophy, they say, is far more dangerous than a walk on slippery rocks. It's an enemy of orthodoxy and a friend of heresy. It's typically a product of wild, rash, and uncontrolled human speculation. Its doctrines are empty and deceptive. Worse still, they may even come from demons!

Such attitudes are hardly new. The early church father Tertullian famously wrote:

> *What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic . . . Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.{1}*

Should Christians, then, hate and reject all philosophy? Should we shun it, despise it, and trample it underfoot? Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy and urge us to avoid it? In thinking through such questions, it's important that we be careful. Before we possibly injure

ourselves with any violent, knee-jerk reactions, we may first want to settle down a bit and ask ourselves a few questions. First, what exactly is philosophy anyway? What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about it? Might it have any value for the Christian faith? Could it possibly help strengthen or support the ministry of the church? Are there any potential benefits that Christians might gain from studying philosophy? And if so, what are they? These are just a few of the questions that we want to consider.

But let's begin with that first question: Just what *is* philosophy anyway? Defining this term can be difficult. It gets tossed around by different people in a variety of ways. But we can get a rough idea of its meaning by observing that it comes from two Greek words: *philein*, which means "to love," and *sophia*, which means "wisdom." So at one level, *philosophy* is just the love of wisdom. There's nothing wrong with that!

But let's go further. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. And throughout its history, philosophy has gained a reputation for the careful, rational, and critical examination of life's biggest questions. "Accordingly," write Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "philosophy may be defined as the attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions in order to obtain knowledge and wisdom about them."{2} So while philosophy may *sometimes* be a walk on slippery rocks, it may also be a potentially powerful resource for thinking through some of life's most important issues.

Beware of Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy

In their recent philosophy textbook, Moreland and Craig make the following statement:

> *For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work, but in speaking evangelistically on*

> *university campuses with groups like . . . Campus Crusade for Christ . . . Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. . . The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.*{3}

This is a strong endorsement of the value of philosophy in doing university evangelism on today's campuses. But some might be thinking, "What a minute! Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy? And aren't we urged to avoid such dangers?"

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV), the apostle Paul wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." What does this verse mean? Is Paul saying that Christians shouldn't study philosophy? Let's take a closer look.

First, "the Greek grammar indicates that 'hollow and deceptive' go together with 'philosophy.'"{4} So Paul is not condemning *all* philosophy here. Instead, he's warning the Colossians about being taken captive by a particular "hollow and deceptive" philosophy that was making inroads into their church. Many scholars believe that the philosophy Paul had in mind was a Gnostic-like philosophy that promoted legalism, mysticism, and asceticism.{5}

Second, Paul doesn't forbid the *study* of philosophy in this verse. Rather, he warns the Colossian believers not to be *taken captive* by empty and deceptive human speculation. This distinction is important. One can *study* philosophy, even "empty and deceptive" philosophy, without being *taken captive*

by it.

What does it mean to be “taken captive”? When men are taken captive in war, they are forced to go where their captors lead them. They may only be permitted to see and hear certain things, or to eat and sleep at certain times. In short, captives are under the *control* of their captors. This is what Paul is warning the Colossians about. He’s urging them to not let their beliefs and attitudes be *controlled* by an alien, non-Christian philosophy. He’s not saying that philosophy in general is bad or that it’s wrong to study philosophy as an academic discipline.

But doesn’t Paul also say that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world? And doesn’t *this* count against the study of philosophy?

Is Worldly Wisdom Worthless?

In 1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) the apostle Paul wrote, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Some Christians think this passage teaches that the study of philosophy and human wisdom is both foolish and a waste of time. But is this correct? Is that really what Paul was saying in this passage? I personally don’t think so.

We must remember that Paul himself had at least some knowledge of both pagan philosophy and literature – and he made much use of reasoning in personal evangelism. In Acts 17 we learn that while Paul was in Athens “he *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (v. 17; NIV). On one occasion he spent time conversing and disputing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18). Further, when it suited his purposes, Paul could quote freely (and accurately) from the writings of pagan

poets. In Acts 17:28 he cites with approval both the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Cilician poet Aratus, using them to make a *valid theological point about the nature of God and man* to the educated members of the Athenian Areopagus. Thus, we should at least be cautious before asserting that Paul was opposed to *all* philosophy and human wisdom. He obviously wasn't.

But if this is so, then in what sense has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? What did Paul mean when he wrote this? The answer, I think, can be found (at least in part) in the very next verse: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21; NASB). In other words, as Craig and Moreland observe, "the gospel of salvation could never have been discovered by philosophy, but had to be revealed by the biblical God who acts in history."{6} This clearly indicates the *limitations* of philosophy and human wisdom. But the fact that these disciplines have very real *limitations* in no way implies that they are utterly *worthless*. We need to appreciate something for what it is, recognizing its limitations, but appreciating its value all the same. Philosophy by itself could never have discovered the gospel. But this doesn't mean that it's not still a valuable ally in the search for truth and a valuable resource for carefully thinking through some of life's greatest mysteries.

In the remainder of this article, we'll explore some of the ways in which philosophy *is* valuable, both for the individual Christian and for the ministry of the church.

The Value of Philosophy (Part 1)

Moreland and Craig observe that "throughout the history of Christianity, philosophy has played an important role in the life of the church and the spread and defense of the gospel of

Christ."{7}

John Wesley, the famous revivalist and theologian, seemed well-aware of this fact. In 1756 he delivered "An Address to the Clergy". Among the various qualifications that Wesley thought a good minister should have, one was a basic knowledge of philosophy. He challenged his fellow clergymen with these questions: "Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? . . . Do I understand metaphysics; if not the . . . subtleties of . . . Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?"{8} It's interesting to note that Wesley's passion for preaching and evangelism didn't cause him to denigrate the importance of basic philosophical knowledge. Indeed, he rather insists on its importance for anyone involved in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church.

But *why* is philosophy valuable? What practical benefits does it offer those involved in regular Christian service? And how has it contributed to the health and well-being of the church throughout history? Drs. Moreland and Craig list many reasons why philosophy is (and has been) such an important part of a thriving Christian community.{9}

In the first place, philosophy is of tremendous value in the tasks of Christian apologetics and polemics. Whereas the goal of apologetics is to provide a reasoned defense of the truth of Christianity, "polemics is the task of criticizing and refuting alternative views of the world."{10} Both tasks are important, and both are biblical. The apostle Peter tells us to always be ready "to make a defense" for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). Jude exhorts us to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3; NASB). And Paul says that elders in the church should "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9; NASB). The proper use of philosophy can be a great help in fulfilling

each of these biblical injunctions.

Additionally, philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology by bringing clarity and precision to the formulation of Christian doctrine. “For example, philosophers help to clarify the different attributes of God; they can show that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not contradictory; they can shed light on the nature of human freedom, and so on.”{11} In other words, the task of the theologian is made easier with the help of his friends in the philosophy department!

The Value of Philosophy (Part 2)

Let’s consider a few more ways in which philosophy can help strengthen and support both the individual believer and the universal church.

First, careful philosophical reflection is one of the ways in which human beings uniquely express that they are made in the image and likeness of God. As Drs. Craig and Moreland observe, “God . . . is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect.”{12} One of the ways in which we can honor God’s commandment to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37) is to give serious philosophical consideration to what God has revealed about himself in creation, conscience, history, and the Bible. As we reverently reflect on the attributes of God, or His work in creation and redemption, we aren’t merely engaged in a useless academic exercise. On the contrary, we are loving God with our minds—and our hearts are often led to worship and adore the One “who alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; NIV).

But philosophy isn’t only of value for the individual believer; it’s also of value for the universal church. Commenting on John Gager’s book, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Drs. Moreland and Craig write:

> *The early church faced intellectual and cultural ridicule from Romans and Greeks. This ridicule threatened internal cohesion within the church and its evangelistic boldness toward unbelievers. Gager argues that it was primarily the presence of philosophers and apologists within the church that enhanced the self-image of the Christian community because these early scholars showed that the Christian community was just as rich intellectually and culturally as was the pagan culture surrounding it.{13}*

Christian philosophers and apologists in our own day continue to serve a similar function. By carefully explaining and defending the Christian faith, they help enhance the self-image of the church, increase the confidence and boldness of believers in evangelism, and help keep Christianity a viable option among sincere seekers in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Of course, not all philosophy is friendly to Christianity. Indeed, some of it is downright hostile. But this shouldn't cause Christians to abandon the task and (for some) even calling of philosophy. The church has always needed, and still needs today, talented men and women who can use philosophy to rationally declare and defend the Christian faith to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). As C.S. Lewis once said, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."{14} These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't hate philosophy.

Notes

1. Tertullian, "The Prescriptions Against the Heretics," trans. S.L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology* (Vol. V in "The Library of Christian Classics"; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 31-32; cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.

2. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.
3. Ibid., 4-5.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 487.
6. Craig and Moreland, 19.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. John Wesley, "An Address to the Clergy," delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31; cited in Craig and Moreland, 4.
9. See Craig and Moreland, 14-17. I have relied heavily on their observations in this, and the following, section of this article.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 50; cited in Craig and Moreland, 17.

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The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands: A Christian View

Sue Bohlin looks at this important book from a distinctly Christian perspective. Filtering the advice through a biblical worldview increases the purity and strength of the

message on how to minister effectively to your husband.

Why We Need This Book

Talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger has written a book that is improving thousands of marriages: *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands.*{1} We need this book because millions of wives either don't know how to love their husbands wisely and well, or they're too self-centered to see it as important. Dr. Laura credits this dismal condition to forty years of feminist philosophy, "with its condemnation of just about everything male as evil, stupid, and oppressive, and the denigration of female and male roles in families."{2} While the women's movement certainly had a hand to play in the disintegration of relationships and the family, I believe the core cause is our sinful self-centeredness, just as the Bible says.{3}

Which is why we need help, and God instructs older women to train younger women to love their husband and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.{4} *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* is a great resource for learning these important values and skills.

God gives us great power as women. Dr. Laura says, "Men are borne of women and spend the rest of their lives yearning for a woman's acceptance and approval. . . . Men admittedly are putty in the hands of a woman they love. Give him direct communication, respect, appreciation, food and good lovin', and he'll do just about anything you wish—foolish or not."{5}

We'll be looking at these aspects of the proper care and feeding of husbands in this article, starting with a man's need for *direct communication.*

• We can improve on communication by doing it less. God made us verbal creatures, which can frustrate men with the

overwhelming amount of our words. Instead of expecting her husband to be a girlfriend (and men make wonderful husbands, but not girlfriends), the wise wife selects for true connecting value, gives the bottom line first, and chooses her timing well.

• Men make terrible mind readers, so be direct. Dropping subtle hints doesn't work with most men, and it doesn't mean a man is insensitive, uncaring, or oblivious.

• Spell out whether you want help and advice, or if you're just venting. God made men to want to be our heroes, so understand you can frustrate him if he can't fix what's hurting you because all you want is someone to listen.

• And finally, take whatever he says at face value. Women tend to overanalyze men when they are just not that complicated.

Respect

A listener to Dr. Laura's radio show named Edgar wrote, "There are a few things that men want so bad they would do anything for it. I think a good number of men want respect more than love. They like to feel they have some power. I nearly cry when you tell a woman caller to respect her husband. There is so much selfishness in the world—in marriages. Prosperity has allowed women to be so independent, and thus so selfish. I always feel as though I come last—my feelings come last, my needs come last."{6}

"A good number of men want respect more than love." God knew this when He made us. His commands to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:33 reflects each one's deepest needs: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Dr. Emerson Eggerichs of LoveandRespect.com points out that this verse commands a husband to love his wife. Why? She needs love like she needs air to breathe. This same verse commands a wife to respect her

husband. Why? He needs respect like he needs air to breathe.{7}

• Respect means treating someone in a way that builds him up and doesn't tear him down, never denigrating or attacking.{8}

• Respect means always treating the other person with the dignity they deserve as a person made in the image of God.

• Respect means grasping that a man's needs and wants are every bit as valid and important as a woman's needs and wants.

• Respect means not venting to others, *especially* the children. One woman wrote to Dr. Laura, "No emotional outlet is worth damaging my husband's reputation."{9}

There are three A's that men long for from their wives: attention, affection, and affirmation. Respect involves paying attention to what they do simply because they're the ones doing it.

Respect means allowing the other person to be different and do things differently than you. One repentant wife told Dr. Laura, "And in the end, it doesn't much matter that they eat PBJ sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner for a day or that one tooth brushing gets overlooked or whatever little thing that used to set me off!"{10}

One way to give respect is to give grace instead of resenting the things he does that complicate your life (like leaving drinking glasses in the living room or clothing on a chair). Ask yourself, "Is he *intentionally* doing this to bug me? To make my life difficult? If he were to die tomorrow, what wouldn't I give to have him back leaving these things out?"

Appreciation

Ask any woman what she wants, and near the top of her list she'll tell you, "I want to be acknowledged and appreciated

for the things I do." Well, men want the same thing!

A man named Evan wrote to Dr. Laura: "My wife feels that if she doesn't remind me again and again, something won't get done. But the fact is, it makes me feel like her child and that Mommy needs to check up on me. It's degrading. I want to be admired. I want to be acknowledged for being the breadwinner and making sure that we are all well taken care of. My greatest pleasure is when I feel like her hero. Like her 'man.' Not her boy."{11}

It doesn't matter what a husband's primary love language is, every man wants to be shown appreciation for who he is and what he does.

I love to suggest to young wives and mothers, "Keep a gratitude journal to help you be on the lookout for the things your husband does that you appreciate. Every night, write down three things you noticed. And then *tell him* the kinds of things that are in your book!"

• Thank him for going to work every morning even when he doesn't feel like it.

• Thank him for being faithful to you.

• Thank him for loving you.

• Thank him for giving you children—or even desiring to.

• Thank him for taking out the garbage, and changing the oil in your car, and mowing the yard.

• Thank him for bringing home his paycheck and not spending it on gambling or booze or drugs or women.

And then there's the opposite of appreciation. The universal complaint of men who e-mailed Dr. Laura about her book "was

that their wives criticize, complain, nag, rarely compliment or express appreciation, are difficult to satisfy, and basically are not as nice to them as they'd be to a stranger ringing their doorbell at three A.M.!"{12} So allow me to make some suggestions:

• Request, don't demand. Demanding is rude and disrespectful.

• Don't nag. If you have to ask more than once, ask as if it were the first time you were making the request.

• Keep your mouth shut about things that don't matter. Ask yourself, is this the hill you want to die on?

• Don't be controlling—which is micromanaging. Dr. Laura wrote, "When women micromanage, their husbands give up trying to please them, and then the wives complain that their men don't do anything for them."{13}

Proverbs says, "Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body."{14} (This is truer no place more than in marriage.) Let your words be kind and full of appreciation.

Support

A man named Roy wrote to Dr. Laura with some good advice for wives: "If you can't accentuate the positive, at least acknowledge it. The world is full of messages to men that there are standards we don't meet. There is always another man who is more handsome, more virile, or more athletic than we are. None of that matters if the most important person in our life looks up to us, accepts us as we are, and loves us even though we aren't perfect. . . . All I know is that the husband who has a wife who supports him and praises him for the positive things he does is the envy of all the other men who have to live with criticism, sarcasm, and constant reminders of their failures."{15}

Men desperately want and need the support of their wives. This is reflected in what God reveals in His Word when He says, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”{16} And through the apostle Paul, God instructs wives to relate to their husbands in a way that meets this need when He says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”{17}

Submission is basically giving support with a willing, cooperative heart.

A wife’s submission includes knowing her gifts and strengths, and using them to serve her husband and family.

Service has a bad name, but both husbands and wives are called to serve God first and then each other; husbands are called to sacrificially love and serve their wives with Jesus as their pattern.{18}

So what does support look like?

• Believing in him. Telling him, “You have what it takes.” Being his #1 fan.

• Cultivating a cooperative heart.

• Being generous and openhearted—willing to use your gifts and strengths to help him succeed.

• Understanding the importance of making him look good: never saying anything negative in public.

• Creating a home that’s a safe haven from the world.

• Having a warm heart with a positive, cheerful demeanor. Women set the temperature of the home; we are thermostats, not thermometers, of the family. (On the other hand, Proverbs says “A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand.”{19})

• Being interested in him and his life.

• Showing thoughtfulness. What does he like? Do it.

• And though by no means exhaustive, it also means being a person of faithfulness and integrity. That means keeping your promises and being dependable. As Proverbs 31 puts it, "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value."{20}

Good Lovin'

Dr. Laura writes that men need to feel the approval, acceptance and attachment from their women that comes from physical intimacy.{21} For women, emotional intimacy leads to physical intimacy. For men, it's the other way around; physical intimacy is the key to opening their hearts.

A man named Chris writes: "I don't understand why women don't understand that sex is a man's number one need for his wife. It's not just the act and sensation of pleasure, but it's the acceptance by a woman of her man. There's a communion that happens during intercourse that will bond a man to his woman, and he in turn will then begin to give of himself emotionally to her."{22}

Wives can discover that giving themselves sexually to their husbands with a warm, open-hearted, loving spirit, can be the most effective encouragement to getting their husbands to open up emotionally.

"What attracts men to women is their femininity, and femininity isn't only about appearance, it's also about behaviors. Looking womanly and behaving sweetly and flirtatiously are gifts wives give to their husbands." We see this modeled in the Song of Solomon, where the King's bride displays her feminine charms in a holy seduction of her husband, and the way she tells him what she loves about his

body.{23}

Instead, our culture has things backward; many unmarried girls and women flaunt their bodies with a total lack of modesty or propriety. Once they marry, it's flannel nightgowns, wool socks, and no makeup.

Dr. Laura calls wives to give themselves sexually to their husbands, even when they don't feel like it, as an act of love. It's really no different, she points out, than the fact that they expect their husbands to go to work and earn money to support the family even on days they don't feel like it.

She's echoing what God said in 1 Corinthians 7 about husband and wife both fulfilling their marital duty to each other because each one's body belongs not just to themselves but to each other. He also said not to deprive each other for extended periods of time lest we be tempted.

Consider the wisdom of radio listener Herb: "Sex is to a husband what conversation is to a wife. When a wife deprives her husband of sex for days, even weeks on end, it is tantamount to his refusing to talk to her for days, even weeks. Think of it that way, wives, and realize what a deleterious impact enforced sexual abstinence has on a good man who is determined to remain faithful."{24}

I can't recommend *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* highly enough. In fact, I gave a copy to my new daughter-in-law! Let me close with one more piece of wisdom from Dr. Laura: "[M]en are simple creatures who come from a woman, are nurtured and brought up by a woman, and yearn for the continued love, admiration and approval of a woman. . . Women need to better appreciate the magnitude of their power and influence over men, and not misuse or abuse it."{25} Amen!

Notes

1. Laura Schlessinger, *The Proper Care and Feeding of*

Husbands, New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
2. Schlessinger, 3.
3. Jeremiah 17:9
4. Titus 2:4
5. Schlessinger, xvii.
6. Schlessinger, 1.
7. http://www.loveandrespect.com/Articles/article.asp?aid=43&cat=1
8. Schlessinger, 157.
9. Schlessinger, 159.
10. Schlessinger, 158.
11. Schlessinger, 31.
12. Schlessinger, 37-38.
13. Schlessinger, 57.
14. Prov. 16:24
15. Schlessinger, 47-48.
16. Gen. 2:18.
17. Eph. 5:22, 24.
18. Eph. 2:25, 28.
19. Prov. 27:15.
20. Prov. 31:11.
21. Schlessinger, 25.
22. Schlessings, 129.
23. Song of Solomon 5:10-16
24. Schlessinger, 119.
25. Schlessinger. 10.

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The Five People You Meet in Heaven – A Biblical Worldview Critique

Written by Patrick Zukeran

Dr. Zukeran presents a biblical worldview critique of the story by Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven. Albom's story presents some interesting ideas about the afterlife, but falls far short of expressing a complete understanding of God's description of heaven. It misses the importance of being created in God's image, being redeemed to be able to spend eternity with our Creator, and the fellowship with God and all the saints for eternity.

Brief Synopsis

Eddie lives an insignificant life as a maintenance man for the rides at the Ruby Pier amusement park. One day a mechanical failure causes a fatal accident. Eddie rescues a young girl from her death but in the effort, he is killed. This is when the adventure begins.

Eddie enters heaven and discovers it is not a garden but a place where he will meet five people whose lives intersected with his in some significant way on earth, some readily known to Eddie and some unknown to him. These five explain the meaning of Eddie's life and the purpose of heaven. Through this best-seller fictional story, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, author Mitch Albom teaches us his understanding of the meaning of life.

In heaven, Eddie learns five key lessons from the five individuals. First, every life is interconnected so each person impacts others throughout his or her lifetime in ways that may not be recognized. Second, we should live sacrificing

for others, for such acts inevitably lead to good outcomes. Third, forgiveness is necessary to find inner peace. Fourth, love is a powerful virtue that lasts eternally. And finally, our life, as insignificant as it may seem, has a purpose.

Heaven is a place where we find inner peace with ourselves when we learn these lessons. Through this process, we are cleansed of negative thoughts and scars we carried in our lifetime and find true inner peace. After this, we will choose our heavenly dwelling. There we will wait for newcomers whose lives intersected ours on earth. We will be one of the five people they will meet as they learn the meaning of their life on earth.

What accounts for the popularity of Albom's work? He addresses two life questions that every individual wrestles with and desperately seeks answers to: What is the meaning of my existence? and What happens after death? In a creative way, here is a story that offers significance to each person's life and hope beyond the grave.

Albom is an excellent writer and is sincere in his effort. This story causes each one of us to wrestle with these key questions of our existence and eternal destiny, issues many choose to ignore but must inevitably face. He also teaches some valuable life lessons. For these reasons, the story is enjoyable and thought provoking.

But after reading the story, I found that Albom's answers fall short of providing satisfactory solutions to every person's dilemma. In some ways he gets us closer to the answer, but never really gets there. Christians will find that he gives us some appetizers, but fails to deliver the main dish. In what follows, I will present a biblical critique of this story and explain how Albom scratches the surface but never finishes the quest for meaning, significance, and eternal hope.

The Quest for Meaning

What is the meaning of my existence? Does my ordinary life make a difference? Will I look back on my life with regret, feeling that I contributed nothing significant in my lifetime? These are issues most people ask throughout their lifetime and seek answers for.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom teaches that one does not have to be famous or powerful to impact the lives of others. Every person who has understanding can know his or her life was worthwhile.

In Albom's story, the meaning of life comes from understanding that everyone's life is interconnected. Therefore, even small decisions and actions we take can significantly affect the lives of others. In a CBS interview, Albom stated, "I think the meaning of life is that we're all kind of connected to one another. I'm living proof of the influence that one person can have on other people. Look at what Morrie did for me talking to me. And I wrote a book to try to pay his medical bills and went from one person to another person and people come up and say your book changed my life. How did that happen? I'm convinced that everybody has an effect on everyone."{1}

It is true that our life does affect others, some in very significant ways. However, we are still left empty at the end of the novel because Albom's proposed solution falls short of providing ultimate meaning for our existence.

In the story, the main character Eddie learns in heaven that he impacted the lives of others both positively and negatively, often unintentionally. Knowing our life led to another's tragedy or greater enjoyment still begs the question, "So what?" It may feel good temporarily to know I made a difference, but that will not bring everlasting satisfaction. Why should we care if our lives affected others? Before we can answer the question, "What is the meaning of

life?” we must first answer the question, “Why were we created?”

If we are a cosmic accident as Darwinian evolutionary theory teaches, there is no intended purpose for our existence. Therefore, our lives have no ultimate meaning, and impacting the lives of others is meaningless, for our final destiny is extinction.

If God created us for a purpose, then we need to find out why He created us. The answer to the meaning of life is directly tied to the origins question. Since Albom does not answer the origin question, he cannot provide an adequate answer for the meaning of life question. The Bible teaches that we were created by God to love Him, love others, and fulfill His calling upon our lives. Any answer that does not include God as a centerpiece of the answer will fall short, and Albom basically leaves God out of his version of heaven.

Albom’s Heaven

Could the traditional Christian view of heaven be wrong? Albom gives us a very different picture. Albom developed his idea from a story his uncle, Edward Beitchman, told him when he was a child. One night his uncle was lying near death and woke up to see his deceased relatives standing at the foot of the bed. When asked, “What did you do?” his uncle responded, “I told them to get lost. I wasn’t ready for them yet.”{2} Albom remembered this story and began to develop his concept of heaven for the story.

Albom states, “Somewhere, swimming in my head, was the image my uncle had given me around that table, a handful of people waiting for you when you die. And I began to explore this simple concept: what if heaven was not some lush Garden of Eden, but a place where you had your life explained to you by people who were in it—five people—maybe you knew them, maybe

you didn’t, but in some way you were touched by them and changed forever, just as you inevitably touched people while on earth and changed them, too.”

His idea that heaven is a reunion with five people who explain the meaning of your life is masterfully pictured in this work. With each encounter the main character Eddie is taught a new lesson that puts the pieces of his earthly life together so that it begins to make sense. Some lessons bring joy, others bring remorse, but the pain is a cleansing process that results in inner peace. After this, individuals will choose their happiest moment on earth and that will be their eternal abode where they await the opportunity to teach a recently deceased newcomer the meaning of that person’s life.

If heaven was a place similar to Albom’s story, we would be very disappointed, for it is too small and shallow. Our souls are much bigger than this. How quickly we would get bored once we discovered the impact our life made and then spent eternity in a heaven we dream up for our pleasure. Earthly pleasure becomes painful when we get too much of it. The heaven described in the Bible is very different from this earth. Our joy is not wrapped in repeating earthly pleasures but is found in a person, Jesus Christ, who is the center of all creation. Our present earth is fallen and suffers the effects of sin. In heaven, sin and its consequences are not present.

God is the main focus in heaven, but unfortunately, in Albom’s story, God plays a very small role. Psalm 16:11 states, “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” Only a heaven created by and centered on God will be big enough for our soul.

Do All People Go to Heaven?

Albom’s bestseller presents a new and creative vision of

heaven. I agree with Albom that there is a heaven and an existence beyond the grave. However, it appears that Albom implies that everyone will go to heaven, and with this I disagree.

Albom portrays realistic characters in his story, none of whom lived a perfect life. All are guilty of some sin and negative behaviors that have consequences, some greater than others. There is some remorse when individuals in heaven learn how their actions caused negative results, but there is not a just payment for their sin.

Albom appears to assume that everyone will eventually find peace when they learn their lessons from the five people they meet. Although this is a comforting note, it is not what the Bible teaches. Albom's story doesn't reveal the dilemma facing all human beings: sin, failing to perfectly live up to God's perfect standard. It is because of sin that the Bible teaches that not everyone can enter heaven. Jesus states in Matthew 7:13, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

The reason is found in the biblical understanding of human nature and God's nature. Man is sinful while God is holy, perfect, and without sin. The Bible teaches that all are guilty of sin and cannot enter into the eternal presence of a holy and just God. Romans 6:23 states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." What is required is a perfect savior who will pay the price for sin. Albom does not deal with the true nature of God, man, heaven's purpose, man's dilemma of sin, and the solution that God freely offers.

The Bible also teaches that there is a price for rejecting God's gift of grace, Jesus Christ. Jesus states, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to

save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:17-18). All who reject Christ cannot stand before a holy God, and will be separated from Him eternally in Hell.

Fiction can often teach principles that are true. However in this work, Albom's foundational idea of heaven misses the mark because he does not present a proper understanding of human nature and God's holiness.

The People You Will We Meet In Heaven

Who will we really meet in heaven? Our answer is revealed in the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible is proven to be God's inspired word through miraculous confirmation and the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Jesus confirmed His claim to be God through His miraculous life and resurrection, and He affirms the authority of the Bible. The truth about heaven then is revealed not in a novel but in this divine revelation.

The next people we will meet in heaven are the saints of all the ages past (Rev. 7:9 and 19:1). There will be more than five; there will be a multitude! Along with them will be the angelic host.

Will we understand the meaning and see the impact of our life on earth? We will know everything about our life and much more. **We will come to a full understanding of God's plan for all of creation.** Only then will we see how our lives played a role in God's overall plan. We will see things from a renewed perspective because our minds will be transformed and freed from the limitations that resulted from sin. 1 Cor. 13:12 states, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall

know fully, even as I am fully known." If we knew the glory of the real heaven, we would say Albom's, and any human attempt to describe heaven, is too small.

Notes

1. CBSNews.com, The Early Show, "Five People You Meet In Heaven," Sept. 25, 2003, http://www.cbsnews.com.
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Christian Environmentalism — A Biblical Worldview Perspective on You and the Earth

Dr. Bohlin applies a biblical point of view in determining a concerned Christian relationship to environmentalism. As Christians, we know we have been made stewards of this earth, having a responsibility to care for it. Understanding our relationship to God and to the rest of creation gives us the right perspective to apply to this task.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Is There an Environmental Problem?



The news media are full of stories concerning environmental disasters of one kind or another, from global warming to endangered species to destruction of the rain forests to nuclear accidents. Some are real and some are imaginary, but it's not hard to notice that the environmental issue receives very little attention in Christian circles. There are so many other significant issues that occupy our attention that we seem to think of the environment as somebody else's issue. Many Christians are openly skeptical of the reality of any environmental crisis. It's viewed as a liberal issue, or New Age propaganda, or just plain unimportant since this earth will be destroyed after the millennium. What we fail to realize is that Christians have a sacred responsibility to the earth and the creatures within it. The earth is being affected by humans in an unprecedented manner, and we do not know what the short or long term effects will be.

Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*,{1} lists seven degradations of the earth. First, land is being converted from wilderness to agricultural use and from agricultural use to urban areas at an ever-increasing rate. Some of these lands cannot be reclaimed at all, at least not in the near future.

Second, as many as three species a day become extinct. Even if this figure is exaggerated, we still need to realize that once a species has disappeared, it is gone. Neither the species nor the role it occupied in the ecosystem can be retrieved.

Third, land continues to be degraded by the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. While many farmers are rebelling against this trend and growing their produce organically or without chemicals, the most profitable and largest growers

still use an abundance of chemicals.

Fourth, the treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues as an unsolved problem. Storing of medium term nuclear wastes is still largely an unsolved problem.

Fifth, pollution is rapidly becoming a global problem. Human garbage turns up on the shores of uninhabited South Pacific islands, far from the shipping lanes.

Sixth, our atmosphere appears to be changing. Is it warming due to the increase of gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels? Is the ozone layer shrinking due to the use of chemicals contained in refrigerators, air conditioners, spray cans, and fire extinguishers? While I remain skeptical of the global threat that many see, pollution continues to be a local and regional concern prompting ever more stringent emission controls for our automobiles.

Seventh, we are losing the experiences of cultures that have lived in harmony with the creation for hundreds or even thousands of years. Cultures such as the Mennonites and Amish, as well as those of the rain forests, are crowded out by the expansion of civilization.

Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. How should we as Christians think about these problems?

The Environmental Ethics of Naturalism and Pantheism

Some people have blamed Western culture's Judeo-Christian heritage for the environmental crisis. These critics point squarely at Genesis 1:26-28, where God commands His new creation, man, to have dominion over the earth and to rule and subdue it.{2} This mandate is seen as a clear license to exploit the earth for man's own purposes. With this kind of

philosophy, they ask, how can the earth ever be saved? While I will deal with the inaccuracy of this interpretation a little later, you can see why many of the leaders in the environmental movement are calling for a radical shift away from this Christian position. But what are the alternatives?

The need to survive provides a rationale for environmental concern within an *evolutionary* or *naturalistic* world view. Survival of the human species is the ultimate value. Man cannot continue to survive without a healthy planet. We must act to preserve the earth in order to assure the future of our children.

The evolutionary or naturalistic view of nature is, however, ultimately pragmatic. That is, nature has value only as long as we need it. The value of nature is contingent on the whim of egotistical man.{3} If, as technology increases, we are able to artificially reproduce portions of the ecosystem for our survival needs, then certain aspects of nature lose their significance. We no longer need them to survive. This view is ultimately destructive, because man will possess only that which he needs. The rest of nature can be discarded.

In the fictional universe of *Star Trek*, vacations are spent in a computer generated virtual reality and meals are produced by molecular manipulation. No gardens, herds, or parks are needed. What value does nature have then?

Another alternative is the *pantheistic* or *New Age* worldview. Superficially, this view offers some hope. All of nature is equal because all is god and god is all. Nature is respected and valued because it is part of the essence of god. If humans have value, then nature has value.

But while pantheism elevates nature, it simultaneously degrades man and will ultimately degrade nature as well. To the pantheist, man has no more value than a blade of grass. In India the rats and cows consume needed grain and spread

disease with the blessings of the pantheists. To restrict the rats and cows would be to restrict god, so man takes second place to the rats and cows. Man is a part of nature, yet it is man that is being restricted. So ultimately, all of nature is degraded.{4}

Pantheism claims that what is, is right. To clean up the environment would mean eliminating the undesirable elements. But, since god is all and in all, how can there be any undesirable elements? Pantheism fails because it makes no distinctions between man and nature.

The Christian Environmental Ethic

A true Christian environmental ethic differs from the naturalistic and pantheistic ethics in that it is based on the reality of God as Creator and man as his image-bearer and steward. God is the Creator of nature, not part of nature. He transcends nature (Gen. 1-2; Job 38-41; Ps. 19, 24, 104; Rom 1:18-20; Col. 1:16-17). All of nature, including man, is equal in its origin. Nature has value in and of itself because God created it. Nature's value is intrinsic; it will not change because the fact of its creation will not change.{5} The rock, the tree, and the cat deserve our respect because God made them to be as they are.{6}

While man is a creature and therefore is identified with the other creatures, he is also created in God's image. It is this image that separates humans from the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:13-16).{7} God did not bestow His image anywhere else in nature.

Therefore, while a cat has value because God created it, it is inappropriate to romanticize the cat as though it had human emotions. All God's creatures glorify Him by their very existence, but only one is able to worship and serve Him by an act of the will.

But a responsibility goes along with bearing the image of God. In its proper sense, man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter. Man is not sovereign over the lower orders of creation. Ownership is in the hands of the Lord.{8}

God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), and we may certainly use nature for our benefit, but we may only use it as God intends. An effective steward understands that which he oversees, and science can help us discover the intricacies of nature.

Technology puts the creation to man's use, but unnecessary waste and pollution degrades it and spoils the creation's ability to give glory to its Creator. I think it is helpful to realize that we are to exercise dominion over nature, not as though we are entitled to exploit it, but as something borrowed or held in trust.

Recall that in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the steward who merely buried his talent out of fear of losing it was severely chastised. What little he did have was taken away and given to those who already had a great deal.{9} When Christ returns, His earth may well be handed back to Him rusted, corroded, polluted, and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?

This more thoroughly biblical view of nature and the environment will allow us to see more clearly the challenges that lie ahead. Our stewardship of the earth must grapple with the reality that it does not belong to us but to God though we have been given permission to use the earth for our basic needs.

Abuse of Dominion

While God intended us to live in harmony with nature, we have more often than not been at odds with nature. This reality

tells us that man has not fulfilled his mandate. The source of our ecological crisis lies in man's fallen nature and the abuse of his dominion.

Man is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe. He has exploited created things as though they were nothing in themselves and as though he has an autonomous right to do so.{10} Man's abuse of his dominion becomes clear when we look at the value we place on time and money. Our often uncontrolled greed and haste have led to the deterioration of the environment.{11} We evaluate projects almost exclusively in terms of their potential impact on humans.

For instance, builders know that it is faster and more cost effective to bulldoze trees that are growing on the site of a proposed subdivision than it is to build the houses around them. Even if the uprooted trees are replaced with saplings once the houses are constructed, the loss of the mature trees enhances erosion, eliminates a means of absorbing pollutants, producing oxygen, and providing shade, and produces a scar that heals slowly if at all.

Building around the trees, while more expensive and time-consuming, minimizes the destructive impact of human society on God's earth. But, because of man's sinful heart, the first option has been utilized more often than not.

As Christians we must treat nature as having value in itself, and we must be careful to exercise dominion without being destructive.{12} To quote Francis Schaeffer, We have the right to rid our house of ants; but what we have no right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it, out in the place where God made the ant to be. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, it is true, but equal with man as far as creation is concerned.{13}

The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which we

are expected to treat the environment. Leviticus 25:1-12 speaks of the care Israel was to have for the land. Deuteronomy 25:4 and 22:6 indicates the proper care for domestic animals and a respect for wildlife. In Isaiah 5:8-10 the Lord judges those who have misused the land. Job 38:25-28 and Psalm 104:27-30 speak of God's nurture and care for His creation. Psalm 104 tells us that certain places were made with certain animals in mind. This would make our national parks and wilderness preserves a biblical concept. And Jesus spoke on two occasions of how much the Father cared for even the smallest sparrow (Matt. 6:26, 10:29). How can we do less?

Christian Responsibility

I believe that as Christians we have a responsibility to the earth that exceeds that of unredeemed people. We are the only ones who are rightly related to the Creator. We should be showing others the way to environmental responsibility.

Christians, of all people, should not be destroyers, Schaeffer said.{14} We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire, but not just to cut it down. While there is nothing wrong with profit in the marketplace, in some cases we must voluntarily limit our profit in order to protect the environment.{15}

When the church puts belief into practice, our humanity and sense of beauty are restored.{16} But this is not what we see. Concern for the environment is not on the front burner of most evangelical Christians. The church has failed in its mission of steward of the earth.

We have spoken out loudly against the materialism of science as expressed in the issues of abortion, human dignity, evolution, and genetic engineering, but have shown ourselves to be little more than materialists in our technological orientation towards nature.{17} All too often Christians have adopted a mindset similar to a naturalist that would assert

that simply more technology will answer our problems. In this respect we have essentially abandoned this very Christian issue.

By failing to fulfill our responsibilities to the earth, we are also losing a great evangelistic opportunity. Many young people in our society are seeking an improved environment, yet they think that most Christians don't care about ecological issues and that most churches offer no opportunity for involvement.{18} For example, in many churches today you can find soft drink machines dispensing aluminum cans with no receptacle provided to recycle the aluminum, one of our most profitable recyclable materials.

As a result, other worldviews and religions have made the environmental issue their own. Because the environmental movement has been co-opted by those involved in the New Age Movement particularly, many Christians have begun to confuse interest in the environment with interest in pantheism and have hesitated to get involved. But we cannot allow the enemy to take over leadership in an area that is rightfully ours.

As the redeemed of the earth, our motivation to care for the land is even higher than that of the evolutionist, the Buddhist, or the advocate of the New Age. Jesus has redeemed all of the effects of the curse, including our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, and our relationship with the creation (1 Cor. 15:21-22, Rom. 5:12-21). Although the heavens and the earth will eventually be destroyed, we should still work for healing now.

For Further Reading

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Notes

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How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can’t Change

Sue Bohlin presents her personal testimony of how Christ led her to a biblical worldview understanding of her physical state. She explains how understanding her situation ministered to her and others spiritually and emotionally.

The most unique and distinctive thing about me is something I absolutely HATED when I was growing up. I’m one of the last polio babies. I got polio when I was eight months old, in October of 1953, just a few months before the vaccine was developed. My left leg was paralyzed from the hip down, but a couple days after I got sick with polio, some limited use started to return to my virtually dead leg.

Polio left me with one leg shorter than the other, one foot smaller than the other, weakened muscles, and a serious limp. I had several orthopedic surgeries and went to physical therapy once a week. Every day until I was 14, I did exercises with a weighted boot strapped onto my shoe. I would cry, “But I don’t *want* to do my exercises!!!” and my mother would insist, “But you *have* to do your exercises!!!” Before I learned to walk, I was fitted with a full-length steel and leather brace. I was so glad when the movie *Forrest Gump* came out, because my kids were able to see what braces looked like, since they never knew that part of my life!

Polio profoundly affected my body, but it only crippled my body a little compared to what it did to my self image. I hated the way I looked. I hated what the polio had done to me, and I despaired every time I looked in the mirror, thinking, “Ugly! You are so UGLY!!”

So I got good at two things. One was repressing the polio altogether. I got in the habit, which I actually have to this

day, of avoiding looking in mirrors, or seeing my reflection in store windows, or even acknowledging my shadow. I don't want to see the way I walk, because it hurts to see the way I walk. I consider myself an expert on denial; in fact, one of these days I have to get that T-shirt that says, "Call me Cleopatra—Queen of Denial!"

The other thing I got good at was a very special fantasy. It was so private, so personal, that I never even wrote it down. I loved to fantasize that when I grew up, I would become a princess, and my polio troubles would be behind me because those sorts of things don't bother princesses! Now, the chances of a vacuum cleaner salesman's daughter from Highland Park, Illinois, becoming a princess are mighty slim, but I loved my fantasy.

In high school, the polio got in the way of dating. No one seemed able to just accept *me* as someone worth going out with. I had friends who were boys, but hardly anyone was interested in anything more than friendship. My sixteenth birthday was bittersweet because I was "sweet sixteen and never been kissed." High school boys then, like now, weren't exactly paragons of sensitivity and acceptance! My self-esteem dropped even lower.

I went to college at the University of Illinois to work on a degree in Elementary Education. One day in my sophomore year, something happened that changed the entire course of my life.

A friend was handing out flyers inviting students to see that evening's performance of an illusionist-magician. I thought, "Great! I love magic!" I love to see women get sawn in two, and the fake levitating, and all that David Copperfield sort of stuff, and I started to get excited about it. But then I noticed the small letters at the bottom of the flyer: this performance was sponsored by a campus religious organization. "Forget it," I thought. "I am NOT interested in Jesus freaks." But as the day wore on, I felt like a huge magnet was pulling

me to the performance, and I found myself buying a ticket and planning on going. I'm so glad I did.

The illusionist, Andre Kole with Campus Crusade for Christ, was excellent. But I don't remember his magic nearly as much as I remember his message. For one thing, he stopped halfway through the evening and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're going to take a short intermission. After the break I'm going to use my illusion to illustrate some spiritual principles. If this will offend you, I want to give you an opportunity to leave during the intermission." I thought, "What in the world is this guy going to say?" Besides, I had spent one whole dollar on my ticket and I was going to get my money's worth!

When he started again, he said some things I'd never heard before, but which were quite intriguing. He quoted a famous philosopher who said that we each have a God-shaped vacuum within us, and nothing will fit that shape or fill that emptiness except for God Himself. He quoted someone else who had said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. He pointed out that there's a huge difference between Christianity and "Churchianity." Churchianity, he said, is man trying to earn favor with God, trying to work his way to heaven. But Christianity as the Bible explains it is a relationship. It's God reaching down to man and calling us into an intimate friendship with Himself, not because of anything we deserve or anything we can do to please Him, but because He desires to have a relationship with us.

Andre Kole really got my attention when he asked, "Do you know what a Christian really is?" I thought, "Of course I do! A Christian is someone who isn't Jewish!" But he said that according to the Bible, Christian means "Christ-in-one," and that a true Christian is actually indwelled by Jesus Christ Himself. That blew me away.

Then he said, "I'm going to use my illusion to illustrate some points. Just as there are physical laws that govern the

physical universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern the spiritual universe.

The Four Spiritual Laws

“The first law is that God loves you and He offers a wonderful plan for your life. When Jesus was on earth, He said, ‘I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.’ Now what do you suppose He meant by ‘abundant life’? I think He meant a life filled with purpose and joy and direction and fulfillment. But as you look around the world today, you see that, obviously, most people are not living that kind of life. Something is terribly wrong.

“That brings us to the second spiritual law: Man is sinful and separated from God. We don’t like to use the word ‘sin’ today, but it’s a word the Bible uses a lot. It’s actually an archery term, and it means missing the mark or the target. It doesn’t matter if you miss the target by one inch or one mile, you’re still missing it. God commands us to be holy and perfect, just as He is holy and perfect. But we don’t even meet our *own* standards, much less God’s!

“The Bible also tells us that ‘the wages of sin is death.’ That means that the penalty for missing the mark of being absolutely perfect and holy is death—not only the physical death of our bodies, but that when we die, we can’t ever be with God in heaven. It means the death of our spirits as well. And once we commit one sin, there’s nothing we can do to restore ourselves. We’re stuck. There’s a huge chasm between us and God, and there’s nothing we can do to cross it.

“That’s where the really good news comes in. The third spiritual law is that God has provided a solution to this dilemma. Since the Bible says that the punishment for sin is death, someone has to die because of our sin. God didn’t want us to have to pay that penalty, so He sent His own Son, Jesus, from heaven to earth. He took on human flesh—that’s what

Christmas is about—and lived a perfect life. Then He died a heinous death on a cross, even though He was innocent, and He died in our place. Three days later, God raised Him from the dead because He was pleased with Jesus' sacrifice."

Now, I had heard a lot of this stuff before when I was growing up in church, but it had never had any impact on me. I knew a lot of religious facts, but they didn't affect my life in any way. I believed that George Washington was the Father of our Country, I believed that Abraham Lincoln was the best president (I was from Illinois, remember. . ."the Land of Lincoln"!), and I believed that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world. They were all in the same category in my head, and they all had the same affect on me— which is to say, none at all.

But I had never, ever heard what he said next, the fourth spiritual law. "Each of us must accept Christ's gift of eternal life *personally*." He explained that Jesus was offering each of us the gift of eternal life, which means not only going to heaven when we die but, starting that moment, He would live His powerful, holy, beautiful life from INSIDE US. Whoa!! This was a *totally* new concept!! I thought that God stayed in His corner of the universe, and I limped along in my little corner, and never the twain shall meet. But suddenly I was hearing something completely new and different—that God Himself loved me so much He wanted to come live IN MY HEART!!!! As I sat there, reveling in this new information and this incredible offer, I saw that all along, I had thought I was doing all right with God because I was basically a "good girl." But now I realized that I was missing the boat entirely, because I had never entered into a personal relationship with God at all; I had been caught up in rules and rituals and traditions, and had rejected them all because they had no meaning to me. And here was God offering me HIMSELF instead of those dead rules and rituals and traditions!

My whole spirit cried out in one big “YES!!!!!” It felt rather like a flower turning to the sun and bursting forth in full blossom. Andre Kole prayed a short prayer, which I followed along in my heart, but my real prayer consisted of one incredibly joyful “YES!!!”

I went home to my dorm, where I told my roommates, “Guess what? When I left tonight, we were in a triple, but now we’re in a quadruple, because Jesus is now living in my heart!” They just groaned, “OH NO!! You got RELIGION!!” They dismissed what I was saying: “We know what this means, Sue. There’s a guy involved in this somewhere. We know how you work. Every two weeks or so you fall in love with somebody new, and whatever the guy believes, that’s your new philosophy. Last month you were in love with Tony Hunter, and you thought you were Jonathan Livingston Seagull! So this is nothing more than a fad, and it will pass when THIS guy doesn’t work out either.”

So my roommates waited for the fad to pass. That was 1973.

Just a fad? No way!

It wasn’t a fad, and it didn’t pass, because my new relationship with Jesus Christ was the most real thing that had ever happened to me. My life became a perpetual surprise box. No one warned me that when God came to live inside me, He’d be making all sorts of wonderful changes! They just started happening.

For one thing, my language cleared up. When I was still at home, I was a “good girl.” But when I went to college, my crippled self- esteem made me crave the acceptance of my friends. And since they all had mouths like sailors, I started talking like that too. I was never really comfortable with it (because princesses don’t swear!). But within about two weeks of the night I trusted Christ, I realized that it was as if God reached down into my vocabulary box with a great big soapy sponge and cleaned out all the garbage that was in

there—without asking Him to!

I discovered that, for the first time in my life, I wanted to go to church. The friend who had invited me to the Andre Kole show also invited me to his church, which was a block from my dorm but somehow I had never noticed it. I didn't even own a dress, but I got one, and went to church of my own free will for the first time in my life. I made a startling discovery. The church was filled with college students who were there because they WANTED to be, not because their parents had made them go! From the very first time I went, I was captivated by the lights on in everyone's eyes. These people were honestly joyful and so glad to be there! Not only that, but they sang all the verses of the hymns, with enthusiasm! This was a *whole* new experience for me. Then, the pastor got up and taught us from the Bible, relating it to our 20th-century lives. I loved it!

And the third thing that happened was a new hunger to read the Bible. I didn't own one of those, either. I had tried it a couple of times; when I was in elementary school, a priest had told us one day that if we wanted to read a love letter from God, to go home and look in our family Bible and read the epistles. So I tried it. Didn't look like any love letter *I* wanted to read! It was too hard to understand, and seemed so dull and boring, I shut the dusty book and put it back on the shelf. Another time, another priest told us that if we wanted to see how the end of the world would happen, to read the last book of the Bible. What a disaster *that* was! But now I really wanted to read and understand the Bible, so I went to the college bookstore and found the Living Bible, a modern-day paraphrase that I could easily understand. In the first few pages, I found just what I needed: "If you're new to this book…" It gave a suggested order for reading certain books, and I knew I had the help I needed. I couldn't wait for 4 o'clock every day, when I could go back to my dorm room and read about Jesus, this new, wonderful Friend who was now

living in my heart.

But it wasn’t the immediate changes that I want to talk about. Far more important are the long-term changes that God has been working in my life, healing my self-image and helping me deal with the polio.

Healing a Crippled Self-Image

The more I read and studied the Bible, the more I learned to see myself as God said I was, and realized that what He said was so much more accurate and trustworthy than how I felt. I’m a woman, and the way I felt about myself completely depended on external things like whether my hair was clean, whether I was wearing make- up, and the time of the month. So I could wake up, force myself to look in the mirror, and whimper in defeat—then, 30 minutes later, not be so depressed once I’d had a chance to do something about myself. But as I learned to embrace the truth about what God said I was, that it was more valid than my fleeting feelings, it profoundly changed the way I felt about myself.

When I studied Genesis, the first book of the Bible that explains the beginnings of everything, I learned that when God made Adam and Eve in His image, that made them infinitely valuable—not because of themselves, but because of their Creator. And, because I’m descended from Adam and Eve, I learned that I was also made in the image of God, and that makes me infinitely valuable as well. But this was a truth I only learned in my head; I didn’t learn it in my heart until my first son was born.

The whole time I was pregnant with Curt, I prided myself on being a thoroughly modern, non-emotional mother. I knew that newborn human babies weren’t particularly beautiful, as compared to, say, newborn lambs. When I saw my baby, I was going to say, “Yes, that’s a baby all right. Take him and clean him up, and when you bring him back we’ll bond.”

And then Curt was actually born.

When I first laid eyes on this child who was made in my husband's and my image, this child that God had made by taking Ray's intangible love for me and my intangible love for him and creating a tangible baby that we could hold and love, I thought, "WHOA! This is THE most BEAUTIFUL baby the world has ever seen!" I instantly fell in love with this little bundle of baby, and he was infinitely valuable to me, NOT because of anything intrinsic with him—I mean, all babies do is eat and sleep and poop and cry—but because he was made in our image.

A few days later, in the hospital, I had him on my lap doing a finger and toe check, and just sort of smelling his awesome newborn-baby smell, when I suddenly realized with a rush of mother- tiger protective love, that IF ANYONE SO MUCH AS LAID A HAND ON THIS CHILD, I WOULD PERSONALLY TEAR THEM LIMB FROM LIMB!!!! I didn't know I could love anyone that much, but I loved my baby with a ferocious, passionate love that surprised and overwhelmed me. (Okay, okay, I realized this was probably hormones, but it sure felt real enough at the time!) Then, as I lay there in the hospital bed overtaken with these strong emotions, I suddenly realized something else: that if I, being such a finite and limited human being, could love my child so ferociously and passionately, how much more must my heavenly Father, who is infinitely huge and powerful, love me? God loved me even more ferociously and passionately than I could imagine, and that meant that even if the rest of the world thumbed their noses at me and rejected me, if I knew that God loved me like that, it wouldn't matter.

Another truth that God used to heal my broken self-image came when I read in the gospel of John that "as many as received Christ [and I had], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." I learned that simply being a human being doesn't make us a child of God—that just means we are creatures made in His image. I became a child of God when I trusted Christ to save

me from my sins, and according to what Jesus said, I was born again at that point into God's family. Shortly after I learned about being a child of God, I came across one of my favorite names for God in the Bible: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Then suddenly I put the two things together: if God is the King of Kings, and I am a child of God, then the female child of a King is a PRINCESS!!



I made it!! When you look at me, I might not look like much on the outside, but I know that I am a princess on the inside because my heavenly Father the King made me one when I became His child!!

The Hole in My Soul

The other area where God keeps working with me is the whole issue of polio. After I'd been a new Christian for a few months, I heard about a counselor who was sometimes able to pray for people and they received physical healing. So I made an appointment and went to see her.

I said, "Look, I've had polio almost all my life and I don't want it anymore. Would you please pray for me and heal me?"

She replied, "Well, I must tell you that sometimes God chooses to heal people in heaven, but first, tell me about how you feel about your polio."

"I don't like it, and I want you to heal me."

“Not so fast. How do you feel about God for letting this terrible thing happen to you?”

“Everything’s fine with God and me. Could we just get on with this?”

“No, wait. Having polio is an awful thing. Aren’t you just a little bit angry with God for letting this bad thing happen to you?”

I instantly thought, “Good girls don’t get mad at God,” and said, “NO, I’M NOT ANGRY WITH GOD!! Please, just pray for me and I’ll get out of here.”

The counselor smiled gently at me and said, “Sue, I’m afraid that no amount of healing is going to happen in your life until you’re honest with God. I can see that you have a great deal of anger and bitterness and resentment toward God for letting you have polio, and you need to deal with that first.”

“You’re not going to heal me?” I asked plaintively.

She shook her head and said, “I’m not the One who does the healing. I think you need to go pray about what’s going on inside of you first.”

I was terribly disappointed. I had had such hope that finally—FINALLY—I would be rid of the awful, horrible effects of this disease! Polio had ripped a huge wound in my soul as well as damaging my body, but this woman wasn’t going to do things my way. Sadly, I got in my car and drove home.

Along the highway, I prayed, “God, this woman seems to think I have all this anger and bitterness and resentment stored up against You because of the polio. Is there anything to this?”

It was as if God said, “Finally, My precious daughter, you ask the right question!” I realized that I had been stuffing a lifetime of disappointment and pain into an emotional basement, and God was opening the door that I had kept shut

for years. Feelings and memories started coming back to me out of the basement, like the time I was about ten years old.

I knelt next to my bed one night and poured out my heart to God. “God, please PLEASE heal me! I *hate* this polio, You know how much I hate this polio! Please, please give me two normal legs! I hate my body, I hate limping, I hate doing the exercises with the boot, I hate going to physical therapy. I hate the lift on my shoe, and I hate having my left leg shorter than the other, and I hate having to wear such ugly shoes. Oh God, I want to go into a shoe store and buy one pair of beautiful shoes so bad! I hate having to wear different size shoes! And You know I can’t wear high heels with my leg and foot being so weak. And God, if I can’t wear high heels, how can I get married? Everybody knows that brides wear high heels on their wedding day! Besides, who would want to marry me with polio anyway? I hate this toothpick leg, and I hate *hate* HATE the way people stare at me in public, especially little kids. God, please PLEASE heal me tonight while I’m sleeping!”

Then I proceeded to help God out by giving Him helpful suggestions on how to go about healing me. “You can take the extra muscle from my right leg and transfer it over to my left leg. Then stretch the left leg so it’s as long as the right, and pull on my toes so they’re not crumpled up anymore. And in the morning I’ll run downstairs yelling, “Mom! Mom! God healed me!” and she’ll call the *Chicago Sun Times*, and it’ll be on the front page: “God Heals Suburban Girl.” And I won’t be able to go to school because I’ll need to go to a shoe store and pick out some beautiful shoes like everybody else’s, since my different-sized shoes won’t fit. Oh! And God, I’ll be able to SKIP down the street! I’ve never been able to skip!! It’ll be great! Now, I’ll just go to sleep and while I’m sleeping, You work a miracle. Then, in the morning, I won’t even have to throw back the covers to see what You’ve done. I’ll *know*.” I fell into bed exhausted, having poured out my hurting heart to

God, and so hopefully confident that He had heard me and would do what I asked.

In the morning, I was right: I didn't have to throw back the covers to see what had happened during the night. I knew without checking: absolutely nothing. NOTHING!! God had ignored me! I was *furious*. "God, how could You? I poured out my heart to You and You ignored me! You KNOW how much I hate the polio, You KNOW how much I want to be healed! It's no big deal for You to do this for me! If You could part the Red Sea, I know you could heal me! HOW COULD YOU????" Then suddenly, I realized that, in my little ten-year-old heart, I was yelling at God, and I was horrified. Good girls don't get mad at God! So I took all the feelings of anger and disappointment and grief and stuffed them all down in my basement, along with all the other feelings I'd stuffed down there over the years.

And now, here I was, 20 years old, and all these feelings and memories were flooding back, and I realized that the counselor was right. I *did* have a huge amount of anger and bitterness and frustration stored up against God. . .and I didn't have a clue as to what to do about it. I'd never heard anyone speak on "What To Do When You're So Mad At God You Want to Spit in His Face." That sounds blasphemous! But that's how I felt, and I didn't know what to do about it.

So I prayed, "God, I don't know how to handle all these feelings, so I'm asking You to show me what to do. And God, it looks like You're not going to heal me of the polio either, are You? So please help me deal with it. I've always hoped that when I was grown up, it would magically go away, but that isn't going to happen. You're going to have to show me how to deal with the polio, too."

God is faithful, and He answered my prayer. In two ways.

God is Always in Control

First, I learned what has been the single most comforting truth I've ever learned as a Christian: that God has always been in control, and nothing has happened to me that He did not allow to pass through the grid of His love and purpose for my life. It was as if there were a suit of armor around me from the moment I was conceived, and nothing has touched my life that God did not purposely allow to get past the armor. I did not get polio by accident; there was a reason for it. When God saw that polio virus heading for me, He allowed it to do the exact amount of damage to my body that was in His plan for me. But once again, this was a truth I only learned in my head, and the heart-understanding didn't come until the day I took my second son Kevin to an immunization clinic for a shot.

I held him in my arms so that he was facing outward, his little thigh exposed. When the nurse stuck him, he wheeled around, and just before letting out a huge yell, he fixed me with a look of intense betrayal. I knew that if he had been able to put into words what he was feeling, he would have screamed, "You're my MOTHER!! I can't believe you let this woman attack me with that huge STICK!!" I thought, "Oh Kevin, I know you can't understand why I would allow this woman to attack you with that stick. Honey, I *drove* you here so she could attack you with that stick."

What I wanted to say, but it would have been pointless, was "Baby, I know how hard it is for you to understand what's happening. But my Mommy mind is so much bigger than your Baby mind, there's no way I can explain that I know what I'm doing, and I'm letting you hurt because I love you and I'm acting in your best interests, even though all you can feel right now is the pain. I'm so sorry, but you're just going to have to trust me."

I thought, "I'm going to take you home and give you some Tylenol, and you'll start to feel better, and in a few days

all the pain and discomfort will be gone, but the good medicine inside you will make you strong and healthy for many years. Some day you won't even remember that today happened, but the benefits of this shot will last for a long, long time."

Right about then we walked out into the sunlight, and God spoke to me very quietly, on the inside: "My precious Sue, I know how much you hurt because of the polio. I hate it too—in fact, I hate it even more, because it was never part of My perfect Creation in the beginning. When sin entered the world and spoiled everything, polio was unleashed into My beautiful world. I hate for you to suffer like this. But just as My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts, I can't explain to you what I'm doing with the polio any more than you can explain what you're doing to Kevin, and that his suffering is good. Sweetheart, you're just going to have to trust Me."

Then I realized that just as Kevin's pain was going to go away in a matter of days, leaving him years and years free from the pain from the diseases he wasn't going to contract, I needed to see the pain of my polio'd body in the scope of eternity. If my body lives to be 100, which is a very generous estimate, and I have to deal with polio for over 99 years, all that time is still only going to be the length of a pinprick compared to the billions and billions of "years" I'm going to live in heaven—in a *perfect* body. My life on earth does have it difficulties and pain, but it's still temporary when I remember that the majority of my life will be lived in heaven where all pain will be behind me. And just as Kevin's vaccination produced health in his body, I realized that God was using polio to produce character and depth and His kind of beauty in me, which will last for all eternity.

Giving Thanks for Everything

The other way God answered my prayer was in discovering a little book (Merlin Carrothers' *Power in Praise*) that said God wants us to give thanks for *everything* that happens to us. Not just *in* everything, not just the things we think will work out all right, but everything that comes into our lives. The reason we can give thanks is because of the first lesson I learned, which is that God is in control and has unseen, unknown purposes for what touches our lives. The Bible never tells us to FEEL thankful; it just says to give thanks, which is an act of the will and not of emotion. I looked it up, and sure enough, in black and white, there it was Ephesians 5:20. Even in the Greek!

The book is full of story after story of how God changed people's hearts when they thanked Him for things they hated but couldn't change, and I knew I had stumbled across some wonderful wisdom. I remember where I was the first time I told God "thank You" for the one thing I never, ever thought I could give thanks for: my polio.

"God," I started, "I certainly don't FEEL thankful for polio, but Your word doesn't say to go by feelings but by faith, and Your word says to give thanks for all things. So I thank You for letting me have polio. Thank You for my limp. Thank You for the problem that shoes constantly give me, and how hard it is to find them for my mismatched feet. Thank You that I will never be able to wear high heels. Thank You for the way people stare at me. Thank you for all the physical therapy I had to go through, thank You for the boot, thank You for the surgeries, thank You for the brace I had to wear. Thank you that I don't know how well my body will hold up as I get older. I thank You for all these things."

As I disciplined myself to say "thank You" for these things I hated but couldn't change, something interesting started to happen. I realized that saying "thank You" enabled me to

relinquish all the pain and anger I had stored up in my emotional basement, and God took it away and replaced it with His peace. Pain had carved huge caverns in my heart, but now instead of being filled with all the negative emotions I had hidden in there, all that space was now filled with peace and a marvelous joy that came from trusting in the One who loves me perfectly. (In fact, since I'm only 5 feet tall, sometimes I think I'm bigger on the inside than I am on the outside!)

Something else that was interesting happened as I made myself give thanks for this horrible thing I hated but couldn't change. In addition to giving thanks by faith but not by feeling, I found that there were a bunch of things that I could easily, and with feelings of gratitude, give thanks for. I thank God for my parents, who loved me enough to make me exercise and endure surgeries so that I could walk as well as I did. I thank God for my husband, who, even though he's a runner, has never made me feel in the least bit inferior for not being able to keep up with him, and who is exceptionally gracious and sensitive in making allowances for my limitations. I thank God that if I had to have polio, it was in my leg and not in my arms. I'm a calligrapher, and it would be awfully hard to do hand lettering with my toes! I thank God that, even though I have to use a wheelchair in places like airports and amusement parks and malls, when I get to where I'm going, I can get up and walk. And there isn't a day that goes by that I don't thank God for my handicap permit! I get the best parking spaces!

I love happy endings, but this story doesn't have one. At least not as far as my earthly life is concerned. I still have to discipline myself in my reactions and attitudes concerning my body, because I'm now forced to deal with post-polio syndrome. 30 to 35 years after the onset of polio, a whole new set of symptoms crop up: bone-crushing fatigue, increasing muscle weakness, and pain. So far I don't have much trouble with the pain part (thank You LORD!!!!), but I've had to

completely restructure my lifestyle to accommodate a body that is losing strength and ability.

One day, as I was reading 2 Corinthians 12, I puzzled over Paul's re-statement of what God told him concerning his thorn in the flesh: that His power was perfected in weakness. I knew there was a nugget of comforting wisdom in that, and asked God to reveal to me what He meant. He answered my prayer one day when I was looking out a large plate glass window. Next to it was an expanse of brick wall. I was able to look out through the window and see not only a beautiful landscape outside, but I noticed that the sunlight was streaming in through the window. The sun was shining on the other side of the brick wall, too, but I couldn't see it. Then I realized that a glass window is fragile, transparent, and easily broken, but it lets the light shine through. A brick wall is strong, opaque, and is difficult to break it down, but nothing gets through it. When we are weak, whether physically or emotionally, we're like the fragile glass window, and God's power can stream through us, bringing power where we are powerless. When we're strong, like the brick wall, it's difficult to trust God because we're content in our own human strength—but no light, no supernatural power comes through. I am at the place where I'd rather be a window than a wall, because I want God's power and light to shine through me more than I want strength within myself.

At the time of this writing, I've had a chance to share my story with over 10,000 women, and I've never yet found a person who didn't have some sort of private heartache. Everyone has something about herself that she hates but can't change. Mine is on the outside, but for the majority of women, their heartbreak is on the inside. Allow me to encourage you to think about two things as you consider *your* private heartache.

What To Do With the Things You Hate but Can’t Change

First, think about how much God loves you. He proved it once and for all by sending His only Son to die a horrible death in your place, so that you could be reconciled to Him. One truth has been of untold comfort to me: His love is stronger than my pain.

Second, the way to truly relinquish the anger about your private heartache is to give thanks for it. It occurred to me one day that every difficulty in our lives is a beautiful gift wrapped in really ugly wrapping paper. That’s because God loves paradoxes, and He wraps His best gifts in tremendously daunting “paper.” Imagine if someone held out a gift to you wrapped in the newspaper that had spent several days at the bottom of the garbage can, soaked in chicken juice (ew YUCK!) and covered with coffee grounds, with maggots crawling all over it. You’d say, “What in the world kind of gift could possibly be inside such a grotesque wrapping?”and shrink back from it. But God does exactly that. Many of us never get past the paper to open the gift. But that’s what giving thanks will do for you—get you past the ugly wrapping paper to the choice gift inside. For me, it was a heart full of peace and joy. For others, who were sexually abused for example, it’s the delight of discovering He will restore the chunks of your soul that other people stole from you. For still others, it’s learning that even though you never had the earthly Daddy you should have had, you have a heavenly Daddy who loves you more perfectly and intimately than you can ever know till heaven.

But giving thanks is not a magic formula; it doesn’t do any good unless you first have a personal relationship with God by knowing and trusting His Son, Jesus Christ. It is essential that you turn from depending on yourself and your own efforts, and trust Jesus to save you from your sin, placing yourself in God’s hands. If you’re feeling like there’s a rope wrapped

around your heart and it's being tugged from the other end, please let me encourage you to identify that as God Himself, pulling you toward Himself and saying, "I love you! I created you to be in fellowship with Me! Please come to Me and give Me yourself so I can give you Myself." If that's what you're feeling, I suggest you tell God something similar to what I'm going to share with you, and what Andre Kole shared with me the night I trusted Jesus:

"Dear God, I realize I'm a sinner and You are a holy, perfect God. Thank You for sending Your Son Jesus to die on the cross in my place. I trust Him now to save me from my sin and to come live inside me. Please make me into the person You want me to be. Amen."

Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

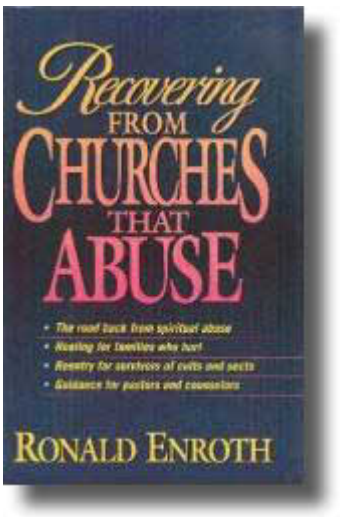
Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Painful Exit Process

In a previous article Abusive Churches, I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.{1} As a result of the

questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.



Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.

One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, “I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It’s like experiencing a death in the family.” The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, “Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.”{2}

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label “role exit.” Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a “vacuum.” In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member

wrote, “I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don’t know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all together.”{3}

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.{4} Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled “spiritually abusive” range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don’t ask

questions and don’t make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member’s personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son’s wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter’s prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One’s spiritual quality is determined by one’s allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas?

Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the "sinful" world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a "true disciple," abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: "The greatest threat to the church today is not from without but from our own leadership within."{5} Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job

identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, "I have heard many pastors say to their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them."{7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the truth. "Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims."{8} Blue continues: "Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism."{9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for

significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a "pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt."{10}

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ's example. "Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all" (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader's heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God's flock as a

steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse,* and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith,* provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For

some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don’t give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God’s character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win

converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that “God is love.” In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God’s grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However, a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.{11}

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."{12} It

is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "Abusive Churches," 1993, Probe Ministries.
2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse,* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits,* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
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11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

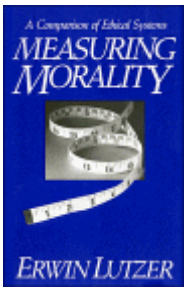
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Cultural Relativism

Kerby Anderson presents the basics of cultural relativism and evaluates it from a Christian worldview perspective. Comparing the tenets of cultural relativism to a biblical view of ethics shows how these popular ideas fail the reasonableness test.

This article is also available in Spanish.

John Dewey



Any student in a class on anthropology cannot help but notice the differences between various cultures of the world. Differences in dress, diet, and social norms are readily apparent. Such diversity in terms of ethics and justice are also easily seen and apparently shaped by the culture in which we live.

If there is no transcendent ethical standard, then often culture becomes the ethical norm for determining whether an action is right or wrong. This ethical system is known as

cultural relativism.{1} Cultural relativism is the view that all ethical truth is relative to a specific culture. Whatever a cultural group approves is considered right within that culture. Conversely, whatever a cultural group condemns is wrong.

The key to cultural relativism is that right and wrong can only be judged relative to a specified society. There is no ultimate standard of right and wrong by which to judge culture.

A famous proponent of this view was John Dewey, often considered the father of American education. He taught that moral standards were like language and therefore the result of custom. Language evolved over time and eventually became organized by a set of principles known as grammar. But language also changes over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of its culture.

Likewise, Dewey said, ethics were also the product of an evolutionary process. There are no fixed ethical norms. These are merely the result of particular cultures attempting to organize a set of moral principles. But these principles can also change over time to adapt to the changing circumstances of the culture.

This would also mean that different forms of morality evolved in different communities. Thus, there are no universal ethical principles. What may be right in one culture would be wrong in another culture, and vice versa.

Although it is hard for us in the modern world to imagine, a primitive culture might value genocide, treachery, deception, even torture. While we may not like these traits, a true follower of cultural relativism could not say these are wrong since they are merely the product of cultural adaptation.

Clifford Gertz argued that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” within which humans must live.{2} Gertz believed that

“Humans are shaped exclusively by their culture and therefore there exists no unifying cross-cultural human characteristics.”{3}

As we will see, cultural relativism allows us to be tolerant toward other cultures, but it provides no basis to judge or evaluate other cultures and their practices.

William Graham Sumner

A key figure who expanded on Dewey’s ideas was William Graham Sumner of Yale University. He argued that what our conscience tells us depends solely upon our social group. The moral values we hold are not part of our moral nature, according to Sumner. They are part of our training and upbringing.

Sumner argued in his book, *Folkways*: “World philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways.”{4} In other words, what we perceive as conscience is merely the product of culture upon our minds through childhood training and cultural influence. There are no universal ethical principles, merely different cultural conditioning.

Sumner studied all sorts of societies (primitive and advanced), and was able to document numerous examples of cultural relativism. Although many cultures promoted the idea, for example, that a man could have many wives, Sumner discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have many husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die by being exposed to the elements. In the Fiji Islands, aged parents were killed.

Sumner believed that this diversity of moral values clearly demonstrated that culture is the sole determinant of our ethical standards. In essence, culture determines what is right and wrong. And different cultures come to different ethical conclusions.

Proponents of cultural relativism believe this cultural diversity proves that culture alone is responsible for our morality. There is no soul or spirit or mind or conscience. Moral relativists say that what we perceive as moral convictions or conscience are the byproducts of culture.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to withhold moral judgments about the social practices of another culture. In fact, proponents of cultural relativism would say that to pass judgment on another culture would be ethnocentric.

This strength, however, is also a major weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral practices of another culture. Yet we all feel compelled to condemn such actions as the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing. Cultural relativism as an ethical system, however, provides no foundation for doing so.

Melville Herskovits

Melville J. Herskovits wrote in *Cultural Relativism*: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation."{5} In other words, a person's judgment about what is right and wrong is determined by their cultural experiences. This would include everything from childhood training to cultural pressures to conform to the majority views of the group. Herskovits went on to argue that even the definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to culture.

He believed that cultures were flexible, and so ethical norms change over time. The standard of ethical conduct may change over time to meet new cultural pressures and demands. When populations are unstable and infant mortality is high, cultures value life and develop ethical systems to protect it. When a culture is facing overpopulation, a culture redefines

ethical systems and even the value of life. Life is valuable and sacred in the first society. Mercy killing might become normal and acceptable in the second society.

Polygamy might be a socially acceptable standard for society. But later, that society might change its perspective and believe that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Herskovits believed that whatever a society accepted or rejected became the standard of morality for the individuals in that society.

He believed that "the need for a cultural relativistic point of view has become apparent because of the realization that there is no way to play this game of making judgment across cultures except with loaded dice."{6} Ultimately, he believed, culture determines our moral standards and attempting to compare or contrast cultural norms is futile.

In a sense, the idea of cultural relativism has helped encourage such concepts as multiculturalism and postmodernism. After all, if truth is created not discovered, then all truths created by a particular culture are equally true. This would mean that cultural norms and institutions should be considered equally valid if they are useful to a particular group of people within a culture.

And this is one of the major problems with a view of cultural relativism: you cannot judge the morality of another culture. If there is no objective standard, then someone in one culture does not have a right to evaluate the actions or morality of another culture. Yet in our hearts we know that certain things like racism, discrimination, and exploitation are wrong.

Evolutionary Ethics

Foundational to the view of cultural relativism is the theory of evolution. Since social groups experience cultural change with the passage of time, changing customs and morality evolve

differently in different places and times.

Anthony Flew, author of *Evolutionary Ethics,* states his perspective this way: "All morals, ideas and ideals have been originated in the world; and that, having thus in the past been subject to change, they will presumably in the future too, for better or worse, continue to evolve."{7} He denies the existence of God and therefore an objective, absolute moral authority. But he also believes in the authority of a value system.

His theory is problematic because it does not adequately account for the origin, nature, and basis of morals. Flew suggests that morals somehow originated in this world and are constantly evolving.

Even if we concede his premise, we must still ask, Where and when did the first moral value originate? Essentially, Flew is arguing that a value came from a non-value. In rejecting the biblical idea of a Creator whose character establishes a moral standard for values, Flew is forced to attempt to derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Evolutionary ethics rests upon the assumption that values are by nature constantly changing or evolving. It claims that it is of value that values are changing. But is *this* value changing?

If the answer to this question is no, then that would mean that moral values don't have to always change. And if that is the case, then there could be unchanging values (known as absolute standards). However, if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then the view is self-contradictory.

Another form of evolutionary ethics is *sociobiology*. E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a major advocate of sociobiology, and claims that scientific materialism will eventually replace traditional religion and other ideologies.{8}

According to sociobiology, human social systems have been shaped by an evolutionary process. Human societies exist and survive because they work and because they have worked in the past.

A key principle is the reproductive imperative.{9} The ultimate goal of any organism is to survive and reproduce. Moral systems exist because they ultimately promote human survival and reproduction.

Another principle is that all behavior is selfish at the most basic level. We love our children, according to this view, because love is an effective means of raising effective reproducers.

At the very least, sociobiology is a very cynical view of human nature and human societies. Are we really to believe that all behavior is selfish? Is there no altruism?

The Bible and human experience seem to strongly contradict this. Ray Bohlin's article on the Probe Web site provides a detailed refutation of this form of evolutionary ethics.{10}

Evaluating Cultural Relativism

In attempting to evaluate cultural relativism, we should acknowledge that we could indeed learn many things from other cultures. We should never fall into the belief that our culture has all the answers. No culture has a complete monopoly on the truth. Likewise, Christians must guard against the assumption that their Christian perspective on their cultural experiences should be normative for every other culture.

However, as we have already seen, the central weakness of cultural relativism is its unwillingness to evaluate another culture. This may seem satisfactory when we talk about language, customs, even forms of worship. But this non-judgmental mindset breaks down when confronted by real evils

such as slavery or genocide. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be merely explained away as an appropriate cultural response for Nazi Germany.

Cultural relativism faces other philosophical problems. For example, it is insufficient to say that morals originated in the world and that they are constantly changing. Cultural relativists need to answer how value originated out of non-value. How did the first value arise?

Fundamental to cultural relativism is a belief that values change. But if the value that values change is itself unchanging, then this theory claims an unchanging value that all values change and evolve. The position is self-contradictory.

Another important concern is conflict. If there are no absolute values that exist trans-culturally or externally to the group, how are different cultures to get along when values collide? How are we to handle these conflicts?

Moreover, is there ever a place for courageous individuals to challenge the cultural norm and fight against social evil? Cultural relativism seems to leave no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Abolishing slavery and providing rights to citizens are good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

The Bible provides a true standard by which to judge attitudes and actions. Biblical standards can be used to judge individual sin as well as corporate sin institutionalized within a culture.

By contrast, culture cannot be used to judge right and wrong. A changing culture cannot provide a fixed standard for morality. Only God’s character, revealed in the Bible provides

a reliable measure for morality.

Notes

1. The general outline for this material can be found in chapter two of *Measuring Morality* (Richardson, Tx.: Probe Books, 1989).

2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

3. E. M. Zechenter, "Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual, *Journal of Anthropological Research,* 1997, 53:323.

4. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 76.

5. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15.

6. Ibid., 56.

7. Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 55.

8. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

9. Robert Wallace, *The Genesis Factor* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1979).

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Race and Racial Issues – A Biblical Christian Perspective

Kerby Anderson looks at the issue of race from a Christian worldview perspective. The Bible clearly teaches that all people are valuable and loved by God with no distinction based on race. As Christians, we are called to set an example by seeing all peoples as worthy of our love and our respect.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Race has divided people in our world for millennia, and the prejudice of racism is still with us today. So in this article we are going to focus on some important aspects of race and racial issues.

At the outset we should acknowledge that, although we will use the term "race" through this discussion, it is not a very precise term. First, the Bible really only talks of one race: the human race. Superficial differences in skin color, hair color, hair texture, or eye shape may provide physiological differences between people groups. But the Bible doesn't provide any justification for treating people differently simply because of these physical differences.

The Bible teaches that God has made "from one blood every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). Here Paul is teaching the Athenians that they came from the same source in the creation as everyone else. We are all from one blood. In other words, there are no superior or inferior races. We are all from the same race: the human race.

Race is also an imprecise term in large part because it is not based upon scientific data. People of every race can

interbreed and produce fertile offspring. It turns out that the so-called differences in the races is not very great. A recent study of human genetic material of different races concluded that the DNA of any two people in the world would differ by just 2/10ths of one percent.{1} And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial categories. The remaining 94 percent is "within race" variation.

Let's put it another way. All the racial differences that have been so important to people for generations are statistically insignificant from a scientific point of view. These differences are trivial when you consider the 3 trillion base pairs of human DNA.

A third reason the term "race" also lacks precision is due to interracial marriage. While it is probably true that the so-called races of the world were never completely divided, it is certainly true that the lines are becoming quite blurred today. Take golfer Tiger Woods as one example. His heritage is Thai, black, white, Chinese, and Native American.

Isn't it ironic that at a time when racial lines are blurring more and more each generation, the government still collects data that requires individuals to check one box that represents their racial or ethnic heritage? A growing number of people are finding it hard to classify themselves by checking just one box.

The Curse on Ham

Sadly, one of the most destructive false teachings supposedly based on the Bible is the so-called "curse on Ham." Ham was one of Noah's three sons (along with Shem and Japheth).

In the past, certain cults and even some orthodox Christian groups have held to the belief that the skin color of black people was due to a curse on Ham and his descendants.

Unfortunately, this false teaching has been used to justify racial discrimination and even slavery.

One group said, “We know the circumstances under which the posterity of Cain (and later Ham) were cursed with what we call Negroid racial characteristics.”{2} Another group argued that “The curse which Noah pronounced upon Canaan was the origin of the black race.”{3}

First, let’s clearly state that the Bible does not teach that people with black skin color are cursed by God. This curse was not the origin of the black race or black racial characteristics.

Second, it wasn’t Ham who was cursed but his son Canaan (Gen. 9:18-27; 10:6). Only one of Ham’s four sons (Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan) was cursed, so how could all black people be cursed?

As it turns out, the curse on Canaan has unfolded in history. The descendants of Canaan were perhaps one of the most wicked people to live on earth. They were the inhabitants, for example, of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Third, even if a curse is given, the Bible clearly places limitations on curses to three or four generations. In Exodus 20:5-6 God says, “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

Notice that this passage seems to teach that curses based upon disobedience are reversed when people repent and turn back to obedience. So not only is a curse limited, obedience to God’s principles can break it.

Fourth, the Bible teaches that the fulfillment of the curse on

Canaan took place with the defeat and subjugation of Canaan by Israel (Joshua 9:23; 1 Kings 9:20-21). This had nothing to do with placing black people under a permanent curse.

Although the idea of "the curse on Ham" has been dying a well-deserved death, it is still important to remember that not so long ago people were misinterpreting a biblical passage to justify their racism and discrimination. No one race or people group is inferior to any other. In fact, the Bible teaches that preferences based upon race, class, or ethnic origin are sinful and subject to God's judgment (James 2:9-13). All of us are created in God's image (Gen. 1:27) and have value and dignity.

Racism

Racism has no doubt been the scourge of humanity. It usually surfaces from generalized assumptions made about a particular race or cultural group. While it is wrong and unfair to assign particular negative characteristics to everyone within a racial group, it is done all the time. The bitter result of these racial attitudes is intolerance and discrimination.

Often racism goes beyond just individual attitudes. These racial attitudes can become the mindset of a particular people group who may use cultural as well as legal means to suppress another race. These cultural norms and laws can be used by the majority race to exploit and discriminate against the minority race.

Although racism has existed throughout the centuries, it gained an unexpected ally in the scientific realm in the nineteenth century. In 1859, Charles Darwin published his famous work *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection of the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. It was the last part of that title that no doubt furthered some of the ideas of racial superiority that

flourished during that time.

It is not at all clear that Darwin meant to apply the concept of favored races in this particular book to human beings. In fact, he did write more on this subject later, but the provocative nature of the subtitle was enough to fuel discussions about racial superiority and inferiority. Later Darwinists took the concept far beyond what Charles Darwin intended.

So why do people hold racist attitudes? Three reasons are: feelings of pride, feelings of inferiority, and feelings of fear. Pride and arrogance fuel racism. When we are proud of who we are, we can easily look down upon those who are different from us and do not manifest the same characteristics that we do. We can start believing we are superior to another person or race.

Racism, however, can come from the opposite end of the emotional spectrum: inferiority. We may not feel good about ourselves. So in order to feel good about ourselves, we disparage another person or race.

Racism also results from fear. We fear what we don't understand. We fear what is strange and foreign. Racial and cultural differences may even seem dangerous to us. Racial attitudes can surface if we don't seek to know and understand those who are different from us.

We should stand strong against racism and racist attitudes wherever we find them: in the society, in individuals, even within the church.

Biblical Perspective

We have already noted that the Bible really only talks of one race: the human race. Superficial differences in skin color, hair color, hair texture, or eye shape may provide

physiological differences between people groups, but the Bible doesn't provide any justification for treating people differently simply because of these physical differences. The Bible teaches that God has made "of one blood all nations of men" (Acts 17:26 KJV).

The Bible also teaches that it is wrong for a Christian to have feelings of superiority. In Philippians 2, Paul admonishes the Christians to live in harmony with one another. They are to have a gentle spirit toward one another, and to let this gentle spirit be known to others.

Christians are also admonished to refrain from using class distinctions within the church. In James 2, believers are told not to make class distinctions between various people. They are not to show partiality within the church. Showing favoritism is called sin and the one showing favoritism is convicted by the law. Surely these commands would also apply to holding views of racial superiority and inferiority.

Likewise Paul instructs Timothy (1 Tim. 5:21) to keep his instructions without partiality and to do nothing out of favoritism. This command would also exclude making racial distinctions based on a view of racial superiority.

Finally, we see that Paul teaches the spiritual equality of all people in Christ. For example, he teaches in Colossians 3:11 that "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all." This is a significant passage because it shows that Christ has removed four kinds of distinctions: national distinctions (Greek or Jew), religious distinctions (circumcised or uncircumcised), cultural distinctions (barbarian or Scythian), and economic distinctions (slave or free).

A similar passage would be Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is

neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Christ, our human distinctions lose their significance. No one is superior to another. A believing Jew is not superior to a believing Greek. A believing slave is of no higher rank than a believing free person.

Racism and racist attitudes are wrong. Christians should work to remove such ideas and attitudes from society.

Becoming Culturally Sensitive

Here are some suggestions on how to become more sensitive to differences in race and culture.

First, we need to take an accurate assessment of ourselves. Often our assumptions and predispositions affect the way we perceive and even treat others. A person who says he or she has no prejudices is probably in denial. All of us perceive the world differently and find it easier to accept people who are like us and harder to understand people who are different from us.

Our cultural worldview affects how we perceive others. It affects how we evaluate what others think and what others do. So an important first step in becoming more racial and culturally sensitive is to evaluate ourselves.

Second, we should try to empathize with others. We must start learning how to look at life and our circumstances from the viewpoint of others. Instead of trying to make others think like us, we should strive to begin to begin to think like them. That doesn’t mean we have to agree with their viewpoint, but it does mean that becoming empathetic will be helpful in bridging racial and cultural barriers.

Third, learn to withhold judgment. Tolerance (in the biblical sense of the word) is a virtue we should cultivate. We should be willing to put aside our critical thinking and judgment

until we know someone better. Taking the time to listen and understand the other person will help build bridges and dismantle barriers that often separate and isolate races and cultures.

Fourth, do not consider yourself superior to another. One of the root causes of racism is a belief in racial superiority. Paul tell us in Romans 12:3 that a man should not "think more highly of himself than he ought to think." Differences in race and culture should never be used to justify feelings of racial superiority which can lead to racist attitudes.

Fifth, develop cross cultural traits. A missionary who goes overseas must learn to develop personal traits that will make him or her successful in a new and different culture. Likewise, we should develop these traits so that we can reach across a racial and cultural divide. Friendliness and open communication are important. Flexibility and open-mindedness are also important. Developing these traits will enhance our ability to bridge a racial and cultural gap.

Finally, we should take a stand. We shouldn't tell (or allow others to tell) racial and ethnic jokes. These are demeaning to others and perpetuate racism and racial attitudes. Instead we should be God's instrument in bring about racial reconciliation. We should seek to build bridges and close the racial and cultural divide between people groups and reach out with the love of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. J. C. Gutin, "End of the Rainbow," *Discover,* Nov. 1994, 71-75.
2. Bruce McConkie, "Apostle of the Mormon Council of 12," *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft,1958), 554.
3. "The Golden Age," *The Watchtower,* 24 July 1929, 702.

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Character of the Cults: A Christian Perspective

Written by Patrick Zukeran

Dr. Zukeran compares the beliefs of several modern cults against a conservative biblical worldview. This analysis makes it readily apparent that cults are not representing a scriptural view of true Christianity.

Challenge of the Cults

This church is growing so rapidly, sociologist Rodney Stark predicts that by the year 2080, it will become the most important world religion to emerge since the rise of Islam.{1} What church is Dr. Stark describing? It is not a Christian church but the Mormon Church, an organization labeled as a cult. The rise of the Mormon Church represents the growing challenge facing the church, the kingdom of the cults.

What is a cult? The greatest authority on the cults, the late Dr. Walter Martin, described a cult as "A group of people gathered around a specific person's misinterpretation of the Bible."{2} Cults are groups that claim to be in harmony with Christianity but deny foundational Christian doctrines such as the Trinity or the unique deity of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 7:15-17, Jesus gives us a warning about the coming of the cults. He states, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them." What Jesus was warning was that cultists will look, act, and sound like Christians. However, that is only in external appearance. One can parade as a true believer for a time, but

eventually one's words, actions, and especially one's beliefs—their "fruit"—will give one away as a counterfeit.

The growth of the cults can be attributed to several factors. First, it is a fulfillment of the warning given by Jesus and the apostles. In Matthew 24:23-26, Jesus warns us that as His return draws near, there will be an increase in false prophets who will ensnare many in their false teachings. In 2 Peter 2:1-3, Peter warns us that false teachers will arise from within the church.

The second factor in the growth of the cults is the breakdown of the family. Cults provide the family atmosphere many from broken homes long for; the cult leader often takes the place of a father figure.

Finally, we can attribute the growth of the cults to the failure of the church. As my mentor repeatedly stated, "The cults are the unpaid bills of the church." The cults thrive because Christians are lacking in biblical and theological understanding. Dr. Martin stated, "The rise of the cults is directly proportional to the fluctuating emphasis which the church has placed on the teachings of biblical doctrine to Christian laymen. To be sure, few pastors, teachers, and evangelists defend adequately their beliefs, but most of them – and most of the average Christian laymen – are hard put to confront and refute a well-trained cultist of almost any variety."{3} If the church engaged in solid and in-depth Bible teaching, the cults would not flourish as they do today.

Doctrinal Character of the Cults

How do you know if a religious group is a cult? Jesus said that you will know false prophets by their fruits. In stating this he was not only speaking of their words and actions but of their doctrinal beliefs as well. Cults deviate from biblical Christianity in several key areas of doctrine.

Cults promote false teaching on the nature of God. The Bible teaches there is one God revealed in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The central feature that distinguishes cults from biblical Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity. All cults have a distorted view of this doctrine. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses condemn the doctrine of the Trinity, and Mormons teach tritheism, three gods who make up the godhead.

Second, cults teach a false view of Jesus. The Bible teaches that Christ is 100 percent man and 100 percent God. This has been called the *hypostatic union*. In 2 Corinthians 11:4, Paul warned about false teachers teaching another Jesus. A modern-day example of false teaching is Christian Science which teaches that Jesus was not God but a man who displayed the Christ idea. He neither died for sins, nor was He resurrected.

Third is a false teaching on salvation. All cults have a works-oriented Gospel. The death of Christ is believed to give followers the *potential* to be saved. So after believing in Christ, one must serve the organization to attain salvation. Salvation is found in the organization and one is never really sure if one has done enough to be worthy of salvation. In the International Church of Christ, for example, disciples are scrutinized by their discipler daily to determine if they performed as worthy disciples. Failure to meet the standards may result in discipline. Disciples can never be certain they have done enough for salvation.

Fourth, there is extra-biblical revelation and the denial of the sole authority of the Bible. Cults claim that extra revelation is given to the leader whose words are seen as inspired by God and equal to the Bible. If there is a conflict between the Bible and the leader's words, the latter takes precedence. So in reality, the leader's writings take precedence over the Bible. When interacting with cultists, I often hear them claim their teachings are consistent with the Bible. However, when I point out where their teachings deviate

from the Bible, they eventually claim the Bible to be in error. In most cases, cultists claim the Bible has somehow been corrupted by the church.

Sociological Structure of the Cults

Not only do cults deviate doctrinally from biblical Christianity, they have distinctive sociological characteristics. The first is authoritarianism. The leader or organization exercises complete control over a follower's life. The words of the leadership are ultimate and often considered divinely inspired. Going against the leadership is equivalent to going against the commands of God.

The second characteristic is an elitist mentality. Most cults believe they are the true church and the only ones who will be saved. This is because the group believes they have new revelation or understanding that gives them superior standing.

Third is isolationism. Due to their elitist mentality, cultists believe those who do not agree with them are deceived or under the influence of Satan. Therefore, many feel their members must be protected from the outside world, and physical or psychological barriers are created. Members are prohibited from communicating with those outside the organization who do not agree with the teachings of the group.

Fourth, there is closed-mindedness and the discouragement of individual thinking. Because of its authoritarian nature, leaders are the only ones thought to be able to properly interpret the Bible. All members are to turn to the organization for biblical interpretation and advice on life decisions. Therefore, individual thinking and questioning is discouraged. There is an unwillingness to dialogue and consider other viewpoints.

Fifth is a legalistic lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, salvation is not based on grace; cults teach a works-oriented

gospel. This leads to a lifestyle of legalism. Followers must live up to the group's standards in order to attain or maintain their membership and hope for eternal life. Followers are required to faithfully serve, and attend meetings, studies, and services. As a result, there is tremendous pressure to live up to the requirements of the organization.

Finally there is a difficult exit process. Since salvation is found in the organization, leaving the organization is considered by many to be leaving God. All former members who leave cults are shunned by members which often includes members of their own family. Many are warned that if they leave, they will be condemned to hell, or seduced by Satan. Many ex-members are harassed by the organization even after they leave. Exiting members often end up distrusting any religious organization and end up feeling isolated and alone.

Life in the cults is marked by fear of judgment, pressure, and legalism. This is a far cry from what we are taught in the Bible. Jesus and the apostles taught that the new life in Christ is one of grace, love, and freedom from the law. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." The peace and rest promised by Christ is seldom experienced by those in the cults.

Cultic Methodology

When you receive a knock on your door in the mornings, who do you assume it to be? A salesman? A Girl Scout selling cookies? For many of us, we assume it to be a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon missionary looking to tell us about his or her organization. One of the reasons cults have grown is their methodology.

The methods cults use to win converts are moral deception, aggressive proselytizing, and Scripture twisting. By moral deception I mean cults use Christian terminology to win

converts. For example, New Agers use the term *born again* to support reincarnation. Mormons use terms like the *Trinity* and *salvation by grace* but these terms have different meanings than what the Bible teaches. Therefore, many untrained Christians are deceived into believing these groups are actually Christian.

Aggressive proselytizing is another method of the cults. Although many Christian groups use aggressive evangelism, they do so out of a love for God and a desire to see others come to know Christ. Many cultists proselytize for much the same reasons but added to this is the desire to win God's approval. They work *for* grace rather than *from* grace. The cults require their members to evangelize. Many groups hold their members accountable for the number of hours they spend witnessing for the organization. Many members feel guilty if a day or so goes by without them proselytizing.

Scripture twisting is another method of the cults. Cultist quote verses in the Bible that support their position, but skip over the verses that do not. Often, there is gross misinterpretation of Scripture so that contradictory verses will better fall in line with their views.

For example, Jehovah's Witness and Mormons try to use verses to show Jesus is a created being. However, their position is easily shown to be incorrect when you explain the context and correct meaning of the terms. Also, when you show additional verses that contradict their position, they are often surprised and realize they have never seen those verse before or that the organization's explanations of those verses are unable to be supported.

To successfully engage in conversation and effectively witness to those in the cults, Christians must be prepared in the following ways. First Peter 3:15 states that we must always be "prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with

gentleness and respect.” We must be prepared by knowing the word of God through diligent study of it. Second, we must be prepared to overcome our fears and lovingly reach out to cult members, exercising the fruits of patience and gentleness as we share the truth.

Danger of the Cults

The rise of the cults pose a serious challenge to the church because they present several dangers to the church and families involved. First, there is a spiritual danger. First Timothy 4:1 states “…that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” Ultimately the spirit behind all lies and deception is the devil, so the ultimate force behind the cults is the evil one.

Galatians 1:8 states, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other that than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.” The false gospel of the cults cannot lead anyone to salvation. There are eternal consequences for false beliefs. For this reason Jesus and the apostles are very harsh on false teachers.

There is also a psychological danger. The mind controlling techniques used by the organizations can cause immense damage mentally and emotionally. Living under the pressure, guilt, and dependence on the organization has proven to have tremendous negative effects on individuals.

Third, there is domestic danger. Individuals are taught that loyalty to the organization is equivalent to allegiance with God. Therefore, loyalty to the organization supercedes loyalty to family. Thus, if a family member begins conducting himself in a way the organization does not approve of, the cult will often separate the family from the individual member. Isolation can be emotional or physical. Numerous families have

been separated as a result.

In some cases there is a physical danger. The teachings of David Koresh cost the Branch Davidians their lives. Hobart Freeman taught that believers did not need medicine for illnesses, and told his followers to throw all theirs away. As a result, he and fifty-two of his members died from curable conditions.

In light of this threat, what are Christians called to do? First, we are called to study and know the Word of God. Paul writes to Timothy and all saints saying, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Christians should master the Bible so that they will not be deceived by any false teaching. Second, Titus commands us to be able to confront and refute false teachers. Finally, in Acts 20, Paul exhorts the leaders of the church to protect their flock from the false teachers that will prey upon the sheep. Every Christian is called to know the truth so well they can confront false teaching, and protect their church and family from it.

Notes

1. Richard Ostling, *Mormon America* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper Collins Publishing Inc. 1999), p. XVI.

2. Walter Martin & Hank Hannegraph, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Mich.: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), p. 17.

3. Norman Geisler, *When Cultists Ask* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), p. 15.

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Christianity and Racism – Was Jesus a Racist?

Rusty Wright takes a hard look at this question: does Christianity promote racism? He looks at the lives and teachings of Jesus and Paul to see if they taught equality of all races or promoted racism. He finds that it is not the teachings of Christianity that promote racism. A biblical

worldview will create a love for all people and a desire to help them develop personal faith.

Does Christianity Promote Racism?

Thirty years after the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, racial issues in the US remain sensitive. Racial quotas in the workplace and academia continue to be controversial. Prominent corporations are accused of racist practices. Certain supremacy groups promote the Bible, God and the white race. Race and politics interact in ways that carry both national and international significance.

A few years back, the Southern Baptist Convention made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raised a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place? How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" ever become linked with human bondage and social apartheid?

African-American theologian James Cone notes that "In the old slavery days, the Church preached that slavery was a divine decree, and it used the Bible as the basis of its authority."{1}

"Not only did Christianity fail to offer the … [Black] hope of freedom in the world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him tended to degrade him. The … [Black] was taught that his enslavement was due to the fact that he had been cursed by God. … Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the…[Black] should be the servant of the white man…."{2}

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms, drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so the injustice I saw

saddened me deeply. I was appalled that the Ku Klux Klan used the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in North Carolina. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their longstanding policy of racial segregation. Thereafter, any Blacks attending would be handed a note explaining the policy and asking that they not return. I was outraged and left the church. (Postscript: A few years ago I learned that that white church had folded and that an African-American church came to use the same facility. Maybe God has a sense of humor.)

Does Christianity promote racism? Is it mainly a faith for whites? This article will examine these two burning questions.

Was Jesus Racist?

Does the Christian faith promote racism? Is it mainly for whites? Certain extremists think so. Some slavery-era ministers wrote books justifying slavery. George D. Armstrong wrote in *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, "It may be… that Christian slavery is God's solution of the problem [relation of labor and capital] about which the wisest statesmen of Europe confess themselves at fault."{3}

Consider another book, *Slavery Ordained of God*. In it, Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God, … to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family, until another and better destiny may be unfolded."{4}

Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were

locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom. Each had its own turf. Jews considered the Samaritans to be racial "half-breeds." The two groups disputed which followed the Bible better and on whose land proper worship should occur.

The Samaritans were often inhospitable to{5} and hostile toward the Jews. Many Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthened their journeys to bypass Samaria. Jews publicly cursed Samaritans in their synagogues, would not allow Samaritan testimony in Jewish courts, and generally considered Samaritans excluded from eternal life.{6}

Once a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?"{7} Jesus, who as Jew surprised people by mixing freely with Samaritans, told him a now famous story. Robbers attacked a Jewish traveler, beating him and leaving him half-dead. Two Jewish religious leaders ignored the injured man as they passed by. But a Samaritan felt compassion for the Jewish victim – his cultural enemy – and bandaged his wounds, transported him to an inn and provided for his care. Jesus' point? This "Good Samaritan" was an example of how we should relate to those with whom we differ.

The founder of the Christian faith was no racist. He told people to get along. What about a chief expositor of the Christian faith? And why is eleven o-clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week? Let's turn now to these important questions.

Was A Chief Expositor of the Faith A Racist?

Does Christianity promote racism? As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth was no racist. Living in a culturally and racially diverse society that was in many ways analogous to ours, He promoted harmony by His example and His words. What about Paul, one of the chief expositors of faith in Christ?

Paul often had to counsel members of the communities he advised about diversity issues. Some in the groups with which he consulted were Jews, some were non-Jews or "Gentiles." Some were slaves and some were free. Some were men and some were women. The mix was potentially explosive.

From prison, Paul wrote to a friend whose slave had run away, had met Paul, and had come to faith. Paul appealed to his friend on the basis of their relationship to welcome the slave back not as a slave but as a brother. He offered to repay any loss from his own pocket. The letter survives in the New Testament as the book of "Philemon" and is a touching example of a dedicated believer seeking to internally motivate a slaveholder to change his attitudes and behavior.{8}

Paul felt that the faith he had once persecuted could unify people. He wrote to one group of believers that because of their common spiritual commitment, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one…."{9} Paul, a Jew by birth, wrote to some non-Jewish believers that "Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us."{10}

Paul exhorted another group of believers to live in harmony. He wrote, "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony."{11}

Paul promoted harmony, not discord. If the founder of the faith and its chief expositor were not racists, why is eleven o'clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week?

True Followers?

Why is Christianity often associated with racism? The short answer is that some that claim to be followers of Jesus are not really following Him. They may have the label “Christian,” but perhaps they never have established a personal friendship with Christ. They may be like I was for many years: a church member, seemingly devoted, but who had never accepted Christ’s pardon based on His death and resurrection for me. Or they may have genuine faith, but haven’t allowed God into the driver’s seat of their life. I’ve been there, too.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton was a leader of the Georgia Black Student Movement in the 1970s. Bo was a racially prejudiced white Christian. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and some of his cronies beat Norton up. The animosity ran deep.

Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo rejected his hypocrisy and began to follow his faith with God in control. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a Christian conference. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave each other, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Of course not all disobedient Christians are racists. Nor is everyone not aligned with Jesus a racist. But faith in Christ can give enemies motivation to reconcile, to replace hatred with love.

Historical examples abound of true faith opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, came to faith, renounced his old ways, became a pastor, and wrote the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Newton encouraged his Christian friend, William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule in leading a

long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

Does Christianity promote racism? No, true Christianity seeks to eliminate racism by changing people's hearts.

After I had spoken on this theme in a sociology class at North Carolina State University, a young African-American woman told me, "All my life I've been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people. Now I realize those oppressors were not really following Christ."

Is Christianity just for whites? Norton, the Black activist, certainly did not think so. Let's look further at the faith that crosses racial divides.

The Heart of the Matter

Is Christianity just for whites? Jesus and Paul said anyone who believed would be plugged into God forever. Africa has millions who follow Jesus. Koreans send missionaries to the US. And don't we need them!

In Cape Town, South Africa, Saint James Church has been a beacon of diversity and social concern with its white, Black, Asian and biracial members. One Sunday evening, radical Black terrorists sprayed the multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith, who is biracial, saw his wife, Myrtle, die from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. Yet he forgave the killers. "I prayed for those that committed the crime," he told me, "so they, too, can come to meet [the Lord]."

The president of the West African nation of Benin came to the US a few years back with a message for African American

leaders: His compatriots were sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. An often-overlooked component of slavery's historical stain is that Black Africans sold other Black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants.

Benin's President Kerekou, who in recent years had made his own commitment to Christ, invited political and church leaders to his nation so his tribal leaders could seek reconciliation with African Americans.

Brian Johnson, an African-American organizer, said the realization that Blacks sold other Blacks into slavery has been difficult for many African Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to hold the White man responsible," he explained as we spoke. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this…. It's not merely a Black-White thing."

The problem is in human hearts, Johnson believes. "All have sinned," he claims, quoting the New Testament.{12} "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself."{13} True Christianity is not just for whites, and it does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it. Changing corrupt institutions is very important. An ultimate solution to racism involves changing individual hearts.

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3. Quoted in Frazier, loc. cit.; quoted in Cone loc. cit. Neither emphasis nor bracketed words are mine. Emphasis is likely Frazier's or Armstrong's. Bracketed words could be either Frazier's or Cone's.

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6. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 1961, 1966), pp. 958-960. See also John 4:1-45.

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