What the Heck, Mr. Beck?

America has recently been abuzz about Glenn Beck and his rather large contingent of followers. Ever since somewhere between 90,000 and a billion people showed up at his Restoring Honor rally to hear the Fox News host and radio–talker prophesy from on high, fans and foes have heaped adulation, disgust, cheer, hatred, exuberance, and all sorts of emotions on the man himself. The response depends on whom you ask and what sort of political worldview they hold. Those on the political right tend to like him and see where he is coming from; however, those on the opposite side of the political divide generally show antipathy toward Beck and his event.

Adding to the Left's (and some others') angst was the fact that he conducted his rally at the stoop of the civil rights movement–the Lincoln Memorial–on the very spot where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the same day 47 years ago, delivered one of America's defining speeches. Would Mr. Beck live up to that august standard? Would he dare use this sacred place and auspicious moment as an occasion to butcher the Obama administration and, in his view, their evil conspiracy to bring America to the hard left?

In fact, no. He did something out of character. Departing from his usual message, diverging from the political path–he instead spoke of God. He opined about honor. He sounded more like a religious, pulpit–pounder than the partisan, chalkboard artist that he usually is. He declared that "something beyond imagination is happening. America today begins to turn back to God."{1} Wow! How awesome is that? Someone in our nation standing up for God. Or is he?

Who is God?

When we dig deeper, having already donned our distinctively Christian worldview lenses, Beck's message may not be what it

seems. Is he really trying to turn America back to God? The God that we as evangelical Christians believe in—the one in the Old Testament as well as in the New? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The Triune God—you know, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? In fact, as you listen to Mr. Beck's rhetoric, you might notice that he never defines which God he is actually referring to. How can you say that America is turning back to God and never define the God that you are talking about—unless you are taking one for granted? Is this the god of civic religion we hear invoked so often within the halls of power? Maybe America is seeking a god who is not really there—because it doesn't exist. Or maybe America wants to fashion, shape, and mold a god of its own—a god who is not true yet makes people feel a little better.

This god that is being fashioned here by Mr. Beck's verbiage seems to be a god called the Enlightenment, a deity of Reason. Now, please do not get me wrong, I believe that Mr. Beck has the best of intentions. I believe that he sincerely thinks that God is the answer for America. I also believe that Mr. Beck is not alone—there are many Americans, and yes, plenty of Christians, who believe that God is the answer for America and then proceed to form that god into whatever pleases them most. This is the reason why Mr. Beck's rally was a hit for some many people, and many among them, sadly, are church leaders. Yet, Scripture will not allow us to remake God into our own image—this is what He is supposed to be doing to us.

But, I digress. Back to Mr. Beck and the god called the Enlightenment. I believe he is basically trying to foster a moral, ethical movement that stands for things like honesty, integrity, truth, and nobility—you know, good, ol' fashioned morals—hoping that this will save America from its de—evolution. Essentially, he seems to promote morality without the bothersome requirement of bowing down to the One True God of the Bible.

This kind of a cart—before—the—horse thinking was rampant

during the era of the Enlightenment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of God was altered. Instead of looking to the classical Biblical definition of God, these Enlightened thinkers deemed the task of defining who God is, practically unnecessary.

One of the products of the Enlightenment, which seems to be carried over and promoted by Mr. Beck, is stripping morality from the worship of God. Immanuel Kant, one the chief proponents of such Enlightened thinking in the 18th century, reverses the traditional order that morality only flows from a true concept of God. He, instead, believed that you could acquire morality without God, because morality is rooted in reason. "It is reason, by means of its moral principles, that can first produce the concept of God."{2} Did you get it? Kant is claiming that morality establishes the concept of God. Additionally, Kant here is not referring to the One True God of the Bible; rather, it is a god that he has fashioned in his own mind. Basically, God is morality; and you can get morality by being sensible, rationale, reasonable, by looking within yourself.

Mr. Beck's gathering was a pep–rally encouraging people to look within themselves. Don't look to someone else, he proclaimed, we must "look inside ourselves."{3} He eloquently spoke of the "power of the individual" and the difference that you can make when "you look inside yourself."{4} Morality is attainable–not by worship of and communion with a holy, righteous God–but by examining your reasonable self. I believe that Mr. Beck's libertarian political philosophy is not merely the way he sees politics–it is the way he sees all of life.

But we see Scripture providing an altogether different viewpoint–or might I say, worldview. It tells us that men's hearts are deceitful, in fact, so much so that not even the individual himself or herself can know it. It tells us that the belief and worship of God is directly tied to how we live. Wrong beliefs lead to wrong living, overall. The Bible tells

us not to look within ourselves for the solution, but to look to the cross: to look to the true God and his guilt–sacrifice on our behalf. And then it tells us to look toward the community–the church of God–in order to live a holy, moral, ethical life; not so that we can become good patriots, but so that we can become good children of God, and thus more fully human. The end result will be virtuous people living together in harmony.

The bottom line is that faith counts. Looking to God for morality is both Biblical and essential. But many within the Christian community seem to ignore this important fact when they are presented with a celebrity that seems to give voice to their political and moral values. Two leading evangelicals, when commenting about Mr. Beck's gathering to Christianity Today, ignore the ultimacy of faith. "Glenn Beck's Mormon faith is irrelevant,"{5} cried one; while the other proclaimed that Mr. Beck will be seen by evangelicals "as a moral voice, not necessarily a spiritual voice."{6} But I ask once again: can morality and spirituality be divorced from one another? Is faith really irrelevant? No, and no.

What is Honor?

But another question regarding Mr. Beck's gospel is, What does it mean to be honorable? His rally was called "Restoring Honor" and he obviously lauds the idea of honor, but he never defines it. He joked at the rally that America's shape was much like his weight and then added, "That ain't good."{7} So, if America is in such bad condition morally, and if America needs to be restored, what does it need to be restored to? These are all questions he leaves unanswered, yet I believe they are crucial questions from a Christian perspective.

But we may have more answers than we think. The one thing we do know is that Mr. Beck is a political animal. He has made a very nice living in talk radio as well as on television opining his political views. He is an unabashedly libertarian

thinker, believing that small government is the best government, and that citizens deserve the highest amounts of freedom which they lose if government is too large. Thus, weak government equals strong individual freedom.

This, of course, is a legitimate political philosophy—one which many Americans believe in. Yet, Mr. Beck promotes his ideology with the fiercest possible rhetoric. He once queried about murdering Michael Moore: "I'm wondering if I could kill him myself, or if I would need to hire somebody to do it….I've lost all sense of right and wrong now. I used to be able to say, 'Yeah, I'd kill Michael Moore,' and then I'd see the little [arm]band: What Would Jesus Do? And then I'd realize, 'Oh, you wouldn't kill Michael Moore. Or at least you wouldn't choke him to death.' And you know, well, I'm not sure."{8} His résumé also contains insults of the 9/11 victims' families wanting them to just "shut up,"{9} calling Katrina victims "scumbags,"{10} and probably most infamously, claiming that President Obama had "a deep-seated hatred for white people."{11}

So, what is honor? Is honor standing up for what you believe using the most hateful kinds of attacks to do it? Would Mr. Beck be able to call President Obama honorable? Or liberal filmmaker Michael Moore? Or oppositional political pundit Keith Olbermann? Does honor only reside on the political right? It seems that honor for Mr. Beck is not something that transcends politics, but something that is very political, quite partisan. I may be wrong; Mr. Beck's message about honor may be apolitical. But if that is the case, the messenger was flawed. The self-styled prophet who showed up that day at the Lincoln Memorial is a man whose public persona is so filled with partisan, vitriolic attacks upon people who disagree with him politically that it seems clear: "restoring honor" means ascribing to certain political views—his personal views. Yet honor is not about a political view; it transcends politics and should never be abused by being politicized.

Unfortunately, Mr. Beck's message did just that.

Contrast that with the other folks who have been discussing, and yes, preaching about honor for thousands of years. Their message is pure; it is not hogtied to a political context, not confined to the simple, temporal issues of politics—rather, this message is concerned with the eternal. They are the countless preachers, teachers, pastors, church leaders who for centuries have been passing down a true message about honor. It is the Christian concept of honor. Yes, there is honor outside the Christian domain, but never does honor shine more than when it is a part of a Christian worldview. Our faith defines honor and it defines to whom honor is due.

Paul does just that in his letter to Galatia when he writes: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."{12} The very next verse ties what honor is to whom honor is due: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires" [emphasis mine].{13} This is honor in its brightest colors. Living a life of worship to the true God—a life that is characterized by love and its eight subsequent characteristics: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I believe that all of this can be summed up nicely by Paul's words in the same letter when he writes, "if we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit."{14} Whether it is morality or honor, we must realize that this kind of walking can only be done when we are living by the Spirit. The moral, ethical system that Mr. Beck is looking for is located in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is not found by looking inside oneself; it is about looking at God's rich Word. If you choose the first option, you will remain confused in sin; if you practice the second, you will accurately know what morality and honor is. You will indeed have the moral and spiritual power to live it out. That is the only hope for our country, as it is the only

hope for any person or country. Maybe I am wrong about Mr. Beck—but until the Beckian revolution can tell us what honor is and what God we are supposed to turn toward—we should, from afar, keep shouting: "What the heck, Mr. Beck?"

Notes

1. Glenn Beck at the "Restoring Honor" Rally in Washington D.C., August 28, 2010. Video accessed at GlennBeck.com.
2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*.
3. Glenn Beck at the "Restoring Honor" Rally in Washington D.C., August 28, 2010. Video accessed at GlennBeck.com.
4. Ibid.
5. Jerry Falwell, Jr., President of Liberty University. *Christianity Today*, September 2010.
6. Lou Engle, Founder of "The Call." *Christianity Today*, September 2010.
7. Ibid.
8. The Glenn Beck Program, May 17, 2005.
9. The Glenn Beck Program, September 9, 2005.
10. Ibid.
11. Fox and Friends, Fox News Television, July 28, 2009.
12. Galatians 5:22–23.
13. Galatians 5:24.
14. Galatians 5:25.

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Hume's Critique of Miracles

Michael Gleghorn examines Hume's influential critique of miracles and points out the major shortfalls in his argument. Hume's first premise assumes that there could not be miracles and his second premise is based on his distaste for the

societies that report miracles. As a Christian examining these arguments, we find little of value to convince us to reject a biblical worldview saying that God can and has intervened in natural history to perform miracles.

Introduction

One of the most influential critiques of miracles ever written came from the pen of the skeptical Scottish philosopher David Hume. The title of the essay, "Of Miracles," originally appeared in Hume's larger work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1748. This was the Age of Enlightenment, a time in which skepticism about miracles was becoming increasingly widespread among the educated elite.{1} So what were Hume's arguments, and why have they been so influential in subsequent scholarly discussions of this topic?



Hume essentially "presents a two-pronged assault against miracles."{2} He first argues that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." But since "a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle," he says, "is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."{3} In other words, given the regularity of the laws of nature, Hume contends that miracles are exceedingly improbable events. But this is not all. He also argues that since miracle reports typically occur among uneducated, barbarous peoples, they are inherently untrustworthy and, hence, unworthy of our belief.{4}

Now clearly, if Hume is correct, then this presents a real problem for Christianity. For Christianity is full of miracles. According to the New Testament, Jesus walked on water, calmed raging storms, healed diseases, exorcised demons, and brought the dead back to life! But if miracles are really as utterly improbable as Hume maintains, and if reports of miracles are completely lacking in credibility, then it would seem that the New Testament's accounts of miracles are

probably unreliable and that Christianity itself is almost certainly false!

So how compelling are Hume's arguments? Should believers be quaking in their boots, fearful that their most cherished beliefs are a lie? Not at all! As philosopher of science John Earman observed in a scholarly critique of Hume's arguments, Hume's essay is not merely a failure; it is "an abject failure." He continues, "Most of Hume's considerations are unoriginal, warmed over versions of arguments that are found in the writings of predecessors and contemporaries. And the parts of 'Of Miracles' that set Hume apart do not stand up to scrutiny. Worse still, the essay reveals the weakness and the poverty of Hume's own account of induction and probabilistic reasoning. And to cap it all off, the essay represents the kind of overreaching that gives philosophy a bad name."{5} Now admittedly, these are strong words. But Earman argues his case quite forcefully and persuasively. And in the remainder of this article, I think the truth of his remarks will become increasingly evident.

Hume's Argument from the Laws of Nature

What are we to say to Hume's argument that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" and that "the proof against a miracle…is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined"?

First, we might question whether miracles *should* be defined as violations of the laws of nature. According to Christian philosopher Bill Craig, "An examination of the chief competing schools of thought concerning the notion of a natural law…reveals that on each theory the concept of a violation of a natural law is incoherent and that miracles need not be so defined."{6} Thus, we might object that Hume's definition of a miracle is simply incoherent. But this is a debated point, so let's instead turn our attention to a more pressing matter.

When Hume says that the laws of nature are established upon "a firm and unalterable experience," is he claiming that the laws of nature are never violated? If so, then his argument begs the question, assuming the very thing that needs to be proved. It would be as if he argued this way:

- *A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.*
- *Experience teaches us that the laws of nature are never violated (i.e. that miracles never occur).*
- *Therefore, experience teaches us that miracles never occur.*

Such an argument is clearly fallacious. Hume would be assuming "as a premise for his argument the very conclusion he intends to prove."{7} But this is probably *not* what Hume intended.

As Earman observes, Hume's view rather seems to go something like this: "When uniform experience supports" some lawlike regularity "that is contradicted by testimony," then one must set "proof against proof," and judge which of the two is more likely. The result of this new formulation, however, is that "uniform experience does *not* furnish a proof against a miracle in the sense of making the . . . probability of its occurrence flatly zero."{8}

This is an important point. After all, there is a great deal of human testimony that solemnly *affirms* the occurrence of miracles. Thus, the only way that Hume can maintain that the uniform experience of mankind is against the occurrence of miracles is by *assuming* that all miracle reports are false. But *this* assumption, as we'll see, is completely untenable when miraculous events are attested by numerous, independent witnesses.

Hume's Argument Against the Reliability

of Human Testimony

In Part II of "Of Miracles," David Hume argues that there has never been the kind of testimony on behalf of miracles which would "amount to entire proof."{9} He offers four reasons for this claim.{10}

First, no miracle on record has a sufficient number of intelligent witnesses, of good moral character, who testify to a miraculous event that occurred in public and in a civilized part of the world. Second, human beings love bizarre and fantastic tales, and this irrationally inclines them to accept such tales as true. Third, miracle reports are usually found among barbarous peoples. And finally, the miracle reports of different religions cancel each other out, thus making none of them effective for proving the truth of their doctrines.

What should we say in response to these arguments? While all of the points have merit, nevertheless, as Bill Craig observes, "these general considerations cannot be used to decide the historicity of any particular miracle."{11} The only way to determine if a miracle has actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence. How many witnesses were there? Are they known to be honest, or are they generally unreliable?

These questions are particularly important when one considers the cumulative power of independent witnesses for establishing the occurrence of some highly improbable event like a miracle. By "independent witnesses" I simply mean witnesses whose testimony to an event comes from firsthand experience and is *not dependent* on the testimony of others.

As Charles Babbage demonstrated in his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, if one can find enough independent witnesses to a miraculous event, who tell the truth more often than not, then one can always show that the occurrence of the miracle is more probable than not.{12} Craig explains the matter this way: "If

two witnesses are each 99% reliable, then the odds of their both independently testifying falsely to some event are only . . . one out of 10,000; the odds of three such witnesses being wrong is . . . one out of 1,000,000." "In fact," he says, "the cumulative power of independent witnesses is such that individually they could be *un*reliable more than 50% of the time and yet their testimony combine to make an event of apparently enormous improbability quite probable in light of their testimony."{13}

So while Hume's arguments should make us cautious, they cannot prevent human testimony from plausibly establishing the occurrence of miracles. And the only way to determine if the testimony *is* plausible is to carefully examine the evidence.

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 1)

Hume argues that since miracles run contrary to man's uniform experience of the laws of nature, no testimony can establish that a miracle has occurred unless "its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."{14} Although Hume makes it sound as though establishing one miracle would require an even greater miracle, all his statement really amounts to, as John Earman rightly notes, is that no testimony is good enough to establish that a miracle has occurred unless it's sufficient to make the occurrence of the miracle more probable than not.{15}

But in Hume's view this is virtually impossible. *No* testimony is really ever sufficient to establish that a miracle has occurred. And this is problematic. For it can be perfectly reasonable to accept a highly improbable event on the basis of human testimony. In fact, we do it all the time.

Suppose the evening news announces that the number picked in the lottery was 8253652. As Craig observes, "this is a report of an extraordinarily improbable event, one out of several

million."{16} If we applied Hume's principle to such a case, it would be irrational for us to believe that such a highly improbable event had actually occurred. So something is clearly wrong with this principle. But what?

The problem, says Craig, is that Hume has not considered all of the relevant probabilities. For although it might be highly improbable that just this number should have been chosen out of all the possible numbers that *could* have been chosen, nevertheless one must also consider the probability that the evening news would have reported just *this* number if that number had *not* been chosen. And this probability is "incredibly small," for the newscasters would have no reason to report just this number unless it had, in fact, been chosen!{17}

So how does this relate to the question of miracles? When it comes to assessing the testimony for a miracle, we cannot simply consider the likelihood of the event in light of our general knowledge of the world.{18} This was Hume's mistake. Instead, we must also consider how likely it would be, if the miracle had *not* occurred, that we would have just the testimony and evidence that we have.{19} And if it is highly unlikely that we would have just this evidence if the miracle had *not* occurred, then it may actually be *highly probable* that the miracle did, in fact, occur. Even if a miracle is highly *improbable* when judged against our general knowledge, it may still turn out to be highly *probable* once all the specific testimony and evidence for the miracle is taken into account.{20}

Hume and Probability Theory (Part 2)

There's still another problem with Hume's critique, namely, that he never actually establishes that a miracle *is* highly improbable in light of our general knowledge of the world. He simply assumes that this is so. But the problem with this becomes evident when one reflects upon the fact that, for the

Christian, part of what's included in our "general knowledge of the world" is the belief that God exists. What's more, as believers we have at our disposal a whole arsenal of arguments which, we contend, make it far more plausible than not that this belief is really true.

But notice how this will influence our estimation of the probability of miracles. If belief in God is part of our general knowledge of the world, then miracles will be judged to at least be possible. For if an all-powerful God exists, then He is certainly capable of intervening in the natural world to bring about events which would never have occurred had nature been left to itself. In other words, if God exists, then He can bring about miracles! Thus, as Bill Craig observes, whether or not a miracle is considered highly improbable relative to our general knowledge of the world is largely going to depend on whether or not we believe in God. So the question of God's existence is highly relevant when it comes to assessing the probability of miracle claims.{21} While those who believe in God may still be skeptical of most miracle reports, they will nonetheless be open to the *possibility* of miracles, and they will be willing to examine the evidence of such reports on a case-by-case basis.

To conclude, although Hume's critique of miracles is one of the most influential ever written, it really doesn't stand up well under scrutiny. Indeed, John Earman concludes his devastating critique of Hume's arguments by noting his astonishment at how well posterity has treated Hume's essay, "given how completely the confection collapses under a little probing."{22} Although Hume was doubtless a brilliant man, his critique of miracles is simply unconvincing.

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 248.

2. Ibid., 250.

3. David Hume, “Of Miracles,” in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 122.

4. Ibid. See Hume’s discussion in Part II of his essay.

5. John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

6. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 261.

7. Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 65.

8. Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure*, 32

9. Hume, “Of Miracles,” 124.

10. See ibid., 124-41.

11. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 277.

12. This sentence is a paraphrase of a statement from Babbage’s treatise cited in Earman, Hume’s Abject Failure, 54.

13. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 272, n. 26.

14. Hume, “Of Miracles,” 122-23.

15. Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure*, 41.

16. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.

17. Ibid., 271.

18. Jason Rennie, “Epistemology and the Resurrection: An Interview with William Lane Craig,” in Sci-Phi Show Outcasts, 2006, available in the “Interviews” section at bit.ly/9SSrWU (note: this page is accessible by members only. We urge you to register free of charge to access this and many excellent

resources. The link is down the page underneath the "Closer to Truth" links.)

19. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 270.

20. Rennie, "Epistemology and the Resurrection."

21. Ibid. See also the discussion in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 274-76.

22. Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, 71.

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The Enlightenment and Belief in God

The skepticism and relativism seen in our society today didn't just pop up out of nowhere. They received new life during the era of the Enlightenment. Rick Wade provides an overview of this important period.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

We are often tempted to think of our own day as truly unique, as presenting challenges that others have not known. Among other challenges, Christians in the West today have to deal with a foundational philosophical matter: namely, the question of the possibility of knowing truth. The mindset in our society today is either one of skepticism or of relativism. Skepticism says there is truth but we can't know it; relativism says there *is* no fixed truth. These mindsets affect all claims to truth, of course, but they are especially significant for Christians as we seek to proclaim the Gospel

to others and hold onto it ourselves in these days of uncertainty.

Is the challenge of the loss of truth new? Not at all. There have been periods of skepticism throughout the history of the West. In this article we'll take a look at the era known as the Enlightenment, that period in the history of the West extending from the late 17th through the 18th centuries. What we'll see is that the very issues we're dealing with today were problems three centuries ago. Of particular concern to us will be the knowledge of God.{1}

Before looking at the Enlightenment itself, let's take a brief look at the mindset preceding this extraordinary era.

Prior to the Enlightenment, believing in God in the West was like believing in the sunrise; the answer to all the big questions of life *was* God (whether a given individual was inclined to *obey* God was another matter). The Bible was the source of knowledge about Him, especially the Old Testament, for there one could learn, among other things, the history of humankind and the divine purposes. Even political questions were to be solved by the Old Testament.

Everything was understood to work according to God's plan. The events of history were not chance occurrences, but events that served to carry out God's will. The universe was fairly young, having been created by God about 4000 years before Christ, and it was kept in operation through God's immediate involvement. The earth was at the physical center of the universe; since man was the highest level of creation, clearly God's purposes were centered on him.

For some people this picture of the world made for a comfortable home: nice and neat and orderly. However, the world was a mysterious and sometimes frightening place. This, along with the generally held belief in "that Last Judgment where many would be called but few chosen,"{2}

produced in some a pessimistic outlook. "'Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh,' said Sir Thomas Browne, 'nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity.'"{3}

Although the various major landmasses of the earth were known, other civilizations were not. Europeans knew little about other cultures. It was easy to believe that theirs was the highest civilization.

With the rise of science and the discovery of other civilizations came a new way of thinking about "God, man, and the world." Let's look at these briefly.

A Shift in Thinking

Science

In the Renaissance era, the world started getting bigger for Europeans. Knowledge increased rapidly, and from it followed major changes in life. The various strands of change merged in the Enlightenment, culminating in a new way of looking at the world.

A major shift took place in the world of science with the development of the ideas of such people as Francis Bacon (1561-1627). Bacon, an English philosopher and statesman, abandoned the classical deductive way of understanding nature handed down from Aristotle, championing instead an experimental, inductive approach. He rejected the authority of tradition, and provided "a method of experiment and induction that seemed to offer an infallible means of distinguishing truth and error."{4}

Although science was later to become the source of confidence for people in the West, in the early days scientific discoveries were unsettling. For example, the invention of the telescope resulted in the overturning of Aristotle's theory of the universe in which the earth, and hence man himself, was

the center. Aristotle taught that the universe was a series of concentric spheres, one outside the other. “Copernicus and his successors shattered this world,” says historian James Turner.{5}Now man was understood to live on a tiny planet flung out into a space that had no center. It was a time of great confusion. In the words of poet John Donne, “‘Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence [sic] gone.'”{6}The discovery that we aren’t at the center of the universe made people wonder if we are truly significant at all.

More disturbing than this, however, were geological discoveries.{7} It appeared that the earth was older than the current understanding of the Old Testament, which seemed to some to say the world was created about 4,000 years before Christ. The Bible had long been the authority on such matters. Could it be wrong? To question the Bible was to question Christianity itself. Because Christianity provided Europeans’ their basic worldview, such questions were extremely troubling. *Exploration*

Voyages of discovery had a profound impact on Europeans’ view of their place in the world and of their Christian beliefs. Discoveries of other civilizations made Europeans wonder if their Christian civilization was truly any better than any others. China was a particular problem. It apparently predated European civilization, and possibly even the Flood! Like the Europeans, the Chinese saw *themselves* as the center of the world. And China wasn’t Christian!

Other more primitive societies presented their own difficulties. For example, reports of how gentle and loving American Indians were made people wonder about the doctrine of “original sin.” They wondered, too, if it could be that God would destroy such people as these in a Flood.

Furthermore, if other civilizations were able to function

without Christian beliefs, maybe Christianity itself wasn't so significant, at least on the cultural level. Maybe it was just one religion among many.{8} Norman Hampson concludes that "The intellectual challenge of non-European societies [were] a much more direct and fundamental challenge to traditional Christian beliefs than any which seemed likely to come from the scientists."{9}

Thus, the discoveries of science and of voyages first disrupted Europeans' orderly world, and then made people doubt the significance of their religion itself.

The New Cast of Mind

Shift in Knowledge Let's look more closely at changes in thinking that developed during the Enlightenment.

In the early 17th century, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) formulated a very rationalistic philosophy. His primary goal was to produce a logically certain argument for the existence of God. To do so, he employed what has come to be known as the *method of doubt*. Descartes believed we were to doubt any idea that wasn't "clear and distinct." The only idea he could hold in such a manner was that he himself existed. Hence the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." From there Descartes developed his philosophy in a logical, rational manner. He even approached nature from a deductive, rationalistic perspective. Beginning with general principles and known facts of nature, Descartes would deduce what the rest of nature should be like.

Although Descartes' way of looking at the world was overthrown by the experimental approach, his philosophy in general had a profound impact. He is considered by some to be the first modernist philosopher, for he looked for certainty in knowledge within the individual, not from an outside authority. Reason became more important than revelation.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was an immensely significant figure in the developing world of science. His discovery of the law of gravity showed that nature could be understood by man. Man would no longer be at the mercy of an unknown world. Newton's work was so significant for understanding nature that Alexander Pope was prompted to write, "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."{10}

John Locke (1632-1704) was another major thinker in the Enlightenment era. Historian Norman Hampson says, "the new currents of thought all seemed to flow together in [him]".{11} Locke believed that knowledge by experience is superior to that which is accepted by belief and trust – "the floating of other men's opinions in our brains," as he called it.{12} He rejected the theory of innate ideas taught by Descartes, believing instead that our minds begin as blank slates to which is added knowledge by experience. Locke carried this approach into the realm of human nature and morality. He believed that "moral values arose from sensations of pleasure and pain, the mind calling 'good' what experience showed to be productive of pleasure."{13} Although Locke was a Christian, he set the stage for a naturalistic understanding of morality.

New Optimism

This new way of looking at the world, of listening first to experience rather than to tradition and the church, was a major characteristic of the Enlightenment. James Turner calls this a "new cast of mind." No longer were people to be dependent upon the Church to tell them about their world. Now they could learn about it in other ways.

In time the unsettling first wrought by scientific discovery was replaced by an "unprecedented optimism" based on the confidence in man's ability to "shape his material and social environment."{14} There was "a gradual and complex shift in the intellectual climate," Norman Hampson says. "As science

seemed to establish itself on an impregnable basis of experimentally verified fact, doubt and confusion eventually gave way to self-confidence, the belief that the unknown was merely the undiscovered, and the general assumption—unprecedented in the Christian era—that man was to a great extent the master of his own destiny."{15}

Secularization and the Church

The findings of science had profound effects on people's thinking about God and their religion during the Enlightenment. However, science wasn't alone in this. Other forces were at work pushing Europe into a new secularism.

The Beginnings of Secularization

As temporal rulers consolidated their power in Europe, the political power of the Church waned. Fragmented feudal kingdoms began to merge together into nation-states and assumed more power over the people. The Reformation sped up the secularization of politics as governments distanced themselves from the warring churches to maintain peace.

Capitalism and technology furthered the separation as they weakened the hold the Church had on the populace. Before the printing press was invented, for instance, the Church heavily influenced the flow of information in society. But now "the printing press effectively ended church regulation of learning."{16} Other secular institutions arose taking up more of people's lives in areas not governed by the Church. Trade, for example and all it involved— travel, the establishment of businesses, banks and stock exchanges- -added more institutions that were outside the control of the Church. As James Turner says, "The church's words, though still formidable, competed with a widening range of alluring voices that . . . did not have the church's vested commitment to defend Christianity."{17}

Secularization didn't *necessarily* undermine Christianity, however. People might actually have developed a firmer faith as a result of being able to read about and discuss the faith. It could be that "with worldly ambitions curtailed and legal powers short, the churches exercised deeper spiritual influence."{18} Nonetheless, in society the voice of the Church grew weaker.

The Church

The new experimental cast of mind had profound effects on religion and the Church. Religion now came under the same scrutiny as other areas of thought. Doctrine drew greater attention since it suited the new concern with rational and orderly thought. Mystery was downplayed, and tradition lost significance. The new intellectual mood called for individuals to think matters through for themselves, and as a result, people began to divide over doctrinal differences. If "clear and distinct" ideas were what should be believed, as Descartes taught, then the individual person took on an authority previously held by tradition or the Church.

The Protestant Reformation played a major role in the fracturing of the Church and its loss of power. According to Norman Hampson, rival claims to leadership in the Church contributed most to the decline of its intellectual authority in society. If church leaders couldn't agree on what was true, who could? Although cutting edge thinkers were satisfied that traditional attitudes and assumptions should no longer prevail, they were not able to come up with clear alternatives. "The picture," says Hampson, "was one of a confused *mêlée*."{19}

Church leaders began "revising belief to fit the new intellectual style. . . . The very meanings of 'religion' and 'belief' began subtly to change . . . during the Middle Ages religion involved not so much assent to doctrines . . . as participation in devotion, particularly communal ritual.

Religion was more a collective than an individual affair and collectively it came closer to a system of practice than a parcel of tenets, while individually it meant more a person's devoutness than his adherence to a creed."{20} In the Enlightenment, however, doctrines became more important than practice for some, and the result of doctrinal debates was the breakup of the Protestant Church into multiple denominations.

The Bible itself was subjected to the new way of thinking. First, since all texts of antiquity were now open to question, the Bible too became subject to rational scrutiny. Which parts were to be accepted as historically accurate and which rejected? Second, since scriptural teachings were no longer to be accepted simply on the basis of authority, specific matters were brought up for debate – for example, the matter of the reality of hell.

Frenchman Richard Simon (1638-1712) subjected the Old Testament to such scrutiny. His book, *Critical History of the Old Testament,* was the first to examine the Bible as a literary product. He treated "the Old Testament as a document with a history, put together over time by a variety of authors with a variety of motives and interests, rather than a divinely-revealed unity."{21} Although his work was condemned across many Christian denominations, the die was cast, and others continued the same kind of analysis.

Political separation from the Church, new means of learning, the loss of tradition, dissension in the churches, doubts about Scripture—these things and more served to turn attention more to the secular than to the sacred.

Belief in God

Nature and God

All of this – the findings of science and exploration and the new experimental way of thinking, along with doubts about the

validity and significance of Church teaching – took its toll on belief in God.

One concern was the relationship of God to nature. Newton believed God had to be actively involved in nature because the laws he discovered didn't seem to work uniformly throughout the universe. God had to keep things working properly.{22} For those like Newton, the findings of science were exhilarating; they saw them as God's means of ordering His world. "Even those few minds who had entirely given the universe over to orderly natural law," says Turner, "still needed to assume God's existence. For natural laws themselves presupposed a divine Lawgiver."{23}

Nonetheless, a distance developed between God and nature since nature was now understood in terms of natural laws that were comprehensible to men. René Descartes had believed that nature was to be understood in terms of ultimate realities. Thus, he kept science, theology, and metaphysics together. The new experimentalism of Bacon and Newton, however, separated them. "The modern conception of the natural world, understood as clearly distinguished from and even opposed to an impalpable spiritual world, was being invented," says Turner.{24} God was withdrawn more and more "as nature came to be understood . . . as governed by God through secondary causes."{25} He didn't disappear; He just adopted a new mode of operation. A mechanistic strain in science suggested a more impersonal Deity. God began to be thought of as a "divine Engineer."{26} Thus, scientists stopped concerning themselves with metaphysical answers. They looked to nature to explain itself.{27}

Now that God didn't seem to be necessary to the operation of the world, some began to doubt His reality altogether. Prior to the Enlightenment, atheism was a "bizarre aberration" for well over a thousand years in the West. One writer said that, "As late as the sixteenth century, disbelief in God was literally a cultural impossibility."{28} One couldn't explain

the world without God. Growing vegetation, intellectual coherence, the orbits of the planets, the existence of life itself, morality—these and other issues all found their roots in God. With science now able to explain how the world worked, however, doubts about God began to rise. Belief in His existence now rested more on the idea of Providence, the beneficial acts of God on our behalf. It was believed that the earth was made for man's happiness, that there was a morally meaningful order to things, and there had to be a God to explain this.

However, with time there developed a more pessimistic view of nature, which lessened the force of Providence. Nature produced poisonous plants and dangerous animals as well as good things. In the words of the poet William Blake:

> Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?{29}

While there was obviously no wholesale abandonment of belief in God, the foundations for belief seemed to be eroding. And when God's existence became debatable, says Turner, "the center fell out of Western intellectual life. If divine purpose did not undergird the cosmos, then whole structures of meaning collapsed and new ones had to be built up, brick by precarious brick."{30}

Natural Religion—Deism

Norman Hampson notes that, with the splintering of the Church in the Reformation, and with the pressure of looking at everything in terms of the new cast of mind, churches began making concessions in their teachings. "When the churches were prepared for so many concessions, and seemed encumbered rather than sustained by such dogma as they retained, there was a tendency for the educated to drift by easy stages from

Christianity to natural religion."{31} Natural religion, or Deism, was religion divorced from the supposed "superstition" of revealed religion such as Christianity. Human reason unaided by revelation, it was thought, could lead thinking men to the truth of God. Deism was a very basic, not highly elaborated theistic belief. God was "a kind of highest common denominator of the revealed religions." In fact, some thought all the major religions worship the same God!{32} Natural religion was the religion of all mankind. It was centered on man, and it bound all men to a common moral law. Living right counted more than right doctrine. As Pope said,

> For Modes of Faith let graceless zealots fight;
> He can't be wrong whose life is in the right.{33}

Apologetics

The need to prove the truth of Christianity would scarcely have crossed the mind of a medieval preacher.{34} "The known unbelievers of Europe and America before the French Revolution," says Turner, "numbered fewer than a dozen or two."{35} Now the possibility of an intellectually grounded atheism was very real. Fear of unbelief prodded Christian apologists into action.

There were four possible responses to problems created for belief by the many new ideas: to be ignorant of them, to firmly reject new ideas, to accept the new thinking but keep religion autonomous, and to recast Christian beliefs in terms of the new ideas. The latter was the route Deists and others took. "Reason and observation gave always the most certain knowledge of any reality that lay outside our minds," says Turner. "Belief for its own good must therefore be fitted to the new cast of mind."{36}

Some, like the Quakers, believed that belief in God eluded rationality. "On the contrary, the rationalizers insisted, belief in God was entirely reasonable and plausible," says

Turner. “And they trimmed it accordingly where its reasonableness seemed shaky. They played down creeds in general and mysterious doctrines in particular. Truth could not be obscure. They repudiated the metaphysical flights of scholasticism, both Catholic and Protestant, in favor of common-sense arguments grounded in palpable reality. Truth must be plain to see. . . . The use of science soon became a phenomenally popular apologetic tool.”{37}

Morality assumed greater importance as a test of the truth of the faith. As secularization pushed religion more to the private sphere, “emphasis fell increasingly on inner religiousness rather than externalities of ritual. Cultivation of a clean conscience, then, seems to have become a more common test of inward sanctity, a measure of how close one stood to God.”{38} Religion grew more preoccupied with everyday behavior.

This was important in apologetics, because it allowed an escape from concerns about divisive doctrinal concerns and the uncertainties of new philosophy. It had universal appeal. Human nature and conscience worked like natural law: they revealed the moral law in us as natural laws showed God’s rational wisdom in nature. Turner comments:

> Ethics and physics confuted the atheist and confirmed the reasonableness of Christianity. The rational man demonstrated God and everything essential to religion . . . through the marks that Deity had left in this world, ready for reason and observation to discover. Only the fool stumbled into the pit of atheism or the mumbo-jumbo of mystery. . . . Good morals and a small clutch of plain, rational beliefs kept the Christian safe from unbelief and guided him to eternal reward.{39}

This attitude shaped the thinking of subsequent generations of apologists. Perhaps they did stave off atheism for a while. Turner tells us, “These believers . . . had come to terms with

modernity and had refitted belief to sail in its waters. With much of the incomprehensibility and mysterious taken out of it, belief in God was now based more solidly in morality and rationality; that is, in tangible human experience and demonstrable human knowledge. Confusion and uncertainty, apologists might rationally hope, would now give way to a new confidence in reasonable and moral religion."{40}

Conclusion

In the Enlightenment, people were shaken by a new way of thinking that challenged the simple acceptance of tradition and religious authority, but their confidence was restored through science and technology. Today, people are shaken by the loss of *this* confidence. We are seeing now that putting our confidence in our own ability to understand our world and fix it provides a shaky foundation. The need today is for both a reminder that truth *can* be known—ultimately through God's revelation in Christ- -and modesty in our knowledge, which recognizes that we do not now, and never will, know everything.

Notes

1. For an overview of the shift in thought from the premodern to the postmodern, see Todd Kappelman, "The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge," Probe Ministries, 1998, available on Probe's Web site at www.probe.org/the-breakdown-of-religious-knowledge/.
2. Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (New York; Penguin, 1968), 21.
3. Quoted in Hampson, 21.
4. Hampson, 36.
5. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 14.
6. John Donne in Turner, 15.
7. Hampson, 25.

8. Cf. James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 15-16.
9. Hampson, 27.
10. Pope, quoted in Hampson, 38.
11. Hampson, 38.
12. Locke, quoted in Hampson, 40.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Ibid., 23.
15. Ibid., 35.
16. Turner, 11.
17. Ibid., 13.
18. Ibid., 12.
19. Hampson, 31.
20. Turner, 23.
21. Byrne, 11.
22. Hampson, 77.
23. Turner, 27.
24. Ibid., 38.
25. Ibid., 37.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Hampson, 76.
28. Turner, 2.
29. William Blake, quoted in Hampson, 94.
30. Turner, xii.
31. Hampson, 103.
32. Ibid., 104.
33. Alexander Pope, quoted in Hampson, 105.
34. Turner, 8.
35. Ibid., 44.
36. Ibid., 29.
37. Ibid., 29-30.
38. Ibid., 31.
39. Ibid., 32,33.
40. Ibid., 34.

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The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

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

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from

different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

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

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not

exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

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

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and hand-written texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained

important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

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

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

The Advent of the Modern

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

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

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

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how

doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

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

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three

centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

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

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that

any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

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

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it

is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

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

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

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

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is

often a statement such as: “That may be true for you, but it is not true for me.” This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God’s existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

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Christ in a New Age

In April of 1982 a full-page ad appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* and other major newspapers around the world. The ad headline read "The Christ Is Now Here." Notice the term *The Christ*. This is a direct reference to a coming "Messiah" who is expected to usher in a New Age of peace and unity. The term New Age refers to "a time of transformation, a time that will bring great change."

The change that is to come (which many believe is already here) will be a renewed emphasis on the self and self-discovery. This self-discovery is rooted in paganism, witchcraft, and Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

The New Age Movement has become an umbrella term for the

“rising interest in the occult in our day.” Within occult circles the Movement is perhaps better known as the Aquarian Age, the Human Potential Movement, the Holistic Health Movement, or simply Cosmic Humanism. In all of these systems, human beings are seen as free to do their own thing without any accountability to anyone or anything beyond themselves.

In the occult world it is a common belief that there are twelve ages in evolutionary time and that each age lasts approximately two thousand years. Astrologers believe that the current age of Pisces will phase out of existence as we near the year 2000, and the New Age of Aquarius will take its place.

During this time of change and spiritual deception, a growing number of people are embracing New Age practices. About 67 percent of American adults claim to have had a psychic experience. Twenty- five percent of the population believe in reincarnation and among college students that percentage rises to thirty. Forty-two percent of American adults believe that they have been in contact with individuals who have died. One survey stated that (1) 67 percent of American adults regularly read their astrological forecast and (2) school childrens’ belief in astrology is growing dramatically from 40 percent in 1978 to 59 percent in 1984.

Male vs. Female Energies

According to occult thought, the Piscean Age has as its foundation the male-centered energies that characterize Christianity. The Aquarian Age, on the other hand, is an attempt to bring balance back into the evolutionary process by introducing female energies into our understanding. Those who have embraced this new-age understanding of humanity believe that all of the problems that man faces are a direct result of Christianity and its perceived male- centered belief system.

Therefore, a change in man’s thinking must occur to bring

about a more equal system that will allow feminine energies to govern humanity. This female-centered system will be based on intuition and experience rather than logic and rational thought, the latter being seen as male characteristics.

The Bible teaches us that human beings, both male and female, are accountable to the God of creation and are equal in His sight (Gal. 3:28). We are not divine beings who are simply ignorant of our god- like state (Ps. 100:3).

Back to the Future

The past fifty years have given rise to Secular Humanism, the notion that "man and the rest of the material universe are all there is and that there is no supernatural realm and certainly no God." This idea fostered the view that man is only accountable to himself. However, Secular Humanism offers little or no hope to humanity and fails to provide any answers concerning the possibility of human existence after death.

Because Secular Humanism cannot answer man's spiritual questions, many people consider it to be an inadequate answer for individuals seeking wholeness in body, mind,and spirit. Thus even though Secular Humanism has largely replaced Christianity as the dominant religious and philosophical system in the West and established itself as a more "tolerant" way, it cannot answer man's deep questions about himself and his future.

New Age occultism seemingly had the answer. It allowed man to maintain his evolutionary prominence and regain the lost "spirituality" he had previously placed at the altar of humanism. The New Age Movement has permitted man to move toward an evolutionary future in which he becomes an autonomous god who is answerable to no one but himself.

In contrast, the Bible clearly teaches that man is finite and limited in his knowledge of himself and his universe. Isaiah

55:8-9 clearly indicates God's perspective of man's inability to achieve divinity:

> *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,*
> *Neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.*
> *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,*
> *So are My ways higher than your ways,*
> *And My thoughts than your thoughts."*

Likewise, the Scripture identifies the attributes of God as being all-knowing (Matt. 19:26), all-powerful (Rev. 19:6), holy (Rev. 4:8), eternal (Ps.90:2), and loving (1 John 4:16). Man obviously misses the mark on all the above qualities, and it becomes quite apparent that he really is less than divine.

New Possibilities or New Age Lies

The New Age offers man the same deal the serpent offered Eve in the garden. If you eat of this fruit (in this case the idea that you are divine), you will become like God—knowing good from evil. All you need to do is deepen your awareness of this new reality by becoming more open to the Christ within.

The occult world teaches that man is a spiritual being and that God, as an energy force, is inherently within all mankind. Therefore, there has never really been a separation or estrangement, only a belief in one. The New Ager believes that all of life is connected and a part of the whole. Oneness is a goal to be achieved. Man and God are one.

New Age philosopher Benjamin Creme, in his book *The Reappearance of the Christ and the Masters of Wisdom*, points out that "in a sense there is no such thing as God, God does not exist. And in another sense, there is nothing else but God: only God exists. . . . All is God. And because all is God, there is no God."

Confused? You should be! In other words, God is impersonal.

Creme is saying that God is not a person, but that He is an energy that is in all things; therefore, you are divine, along with the rest of creation.

The Scripture, however, is clear in its teaching that God is a personal being and distinct from His creation. God, the Father, has a personal nature. For example, God has a will (Matt. 6:10 and 1 John 2:17), God knows (2 Tim. 2:19), God plans (Eph. 1:11), and God communicates (Ex. 3:13 14). God is distinct or separate from the world, but He is actively involved with His creation (Heb. 11:3; Col. 1:17; Ps. 113:5-6; Isa. 57:15).

Jesus: The Way, or the Way-shower?

For the New Ager, Jesus is one of many Christs who appear in a given age to direct humanity toward the divine—in effect, to show the way to divinity. Jesus was a man who by virtue of his working through the spiritual road-blocks of his life gained the highest evolutionary level that man can achieve and was given the office of "Christ."

Scripture, however, does not allow for such a view. Nor did Jesus consider Himself one of many Christs who would come to point man toward his own personal divinity. John 14:6 is clear in its meaning: there is only one way to the Father and that way is by accepting Jesus as Who He claimed to be, the God-man, the only begotten Son of God. He is not simply one who shows the way, but **is** The Way.

Not only did Jesus confess His deity (Matt. 22:41-45; 26:61-64; Jn. 10:30-33), but His Father likewise acknowledged His deity (Heb. 1:5-8). Jesus is the Word (John 1:1); He is the first born of all creation (Col. 1:15), and the gate by which we must enter for salvation (John. 10:7 9).

Within the New Age belief system, Lucifer is not seen as an evil personality but is looked upon as the angel of man's

inner evolution. He opened the doorway to man's recognition of himself as god.

In his book *Reflections On The Christ*, David Spangler says that "Lucifer is literally the angel of experience. Lucifer, then, is neither good or bad in his true essence. He is completely neutral. He is an agent of God's love acting through evolution." So Lucifer is a positive influence on man who desires the best for humanity and does not embody evil in any form.

Spangler goes on to say, "Lucifer comes to give us the final gift of wholeness. If we accept it then he is free and we are free. That is the Luciferic initiation. It is one that many people now…will be facing, for it is an initiation into the New Age."

The Scriptures do not allow for such a view. Jesus is the deliverer, Lucifer is the deceiver (John 8:44). Jesus is the savior, Lucifer is the accuser (Rev. 12:10). The "initiation" that man must receive is in reality a free gift from God (John 10:7-11). It is not a mystical experience from this world that leads to spiritual death but a gift to be appropriated that leads to eternal life.

Salvation for a New Age

At-one-ment, or absorption into the One energy that is God, is a prominently held view of most New Agers' understanding of salvation. It is the unfolding of one's consciousness to the point that the "True Self," the divine nature, is realized. As a flower unfolds petal by petal, so too does spiritual evolution unfold, revealing the deeper realms of God-consciousness.

In New Age thinking, salvation is "the gaining of enlightenment." It is a state of consciousness in which the person's separation from other humans is transcended and unity

is achieved. It is the absorption of the one into the all. Individuals lose their distinctive personality and become one with the impersonal energy they believe to be God.

Christianity teaches that humans are finite beings who only become whole, in the biblical sense, when they receive God's spirit (Tit. 3:5; 1 John. 5:11). Therefore, true spirituality results from an act; it is not simply a part of human nature (1 John. 1:8-9, Rom. 10:8-9).

Education and New Age Humanism

We said earlier that Secular Humanism lost a lot of its popularity and power because it wasn't satisfying. It didn't adequately meet man's needs or fulfill his spiritual yearnings, especially his concerns about life after death. Still the humanist philosophy is a continued threat to the Judeo-Christian worldview, but now the dominant threat from humanism is New Age Humanism a marriage of New Age spirituality with Humanism's man-centered thought system.

Humanism was and is a real threat to our Christian heritage, but the Eastern philosophical ideas found in New Age thought are even more dangerous to our way of life. Bringing the two systems together into New Age Humanism is more deadly still because in this new synthesis is both a seductive, false religious system and an agenda-driven philosophical system. Inherent in New Age Humanism is an evangelistic zeal to convert (or subvert) the opposition, and gaining influence on the young is a primary goal. One method is getting control of our educational program.

For example, in the early eighties, *Instructor* magazine, a publication for teachers, carried an article entitled, "Your Kids are Psychic! But they may never know it without your help." The article says that "teachers in particular are in a position to play an exciting role in the psychic development of children." The article goes on to identify psychic ability

as the practice of telepathy, clairvoyance, and other psycho-technologies.

Another example of the Eastern influence on education is the teaching of the late Dr. Beverly Galyean. Her primary premise is as follows:

> *In essence we are not individuals but part of the universal consciousness [which is God]. Realizing this essential unity, and experiencing oneself as part of it, is a major goal for a child's education. Because each person is part of the universal consciousness which is love, each child contains all the wisdom and love of the universe. This wisdom and love is the higher self. The child can tap into this universal mind and receive advice, information and help from it. This is usually done through meditation and contact with spirit guides.*

Dr. Galyean continues by saying that "once we begin to see that we are all God…the whole purpose of life is to reown the Godlikeness within us; the perfect love, the perfect wisdom, the perfect understanding, the perfect intelligence, and when we do that, we create back to that old, that essential oneness which is consciousness."

An example of this philosophy is found in Dr. Jean Houston's text *The Possible Human*. Dr. Houston, the past president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, espouses a New Age understanding of education. She refers to "The Master Teacher" as being an inner ally who has urgent messages to send us. Houston says that "if we cooperate with them that is, with our own deepest knowing we begin to notice an astounding change in our lives." In other words, she is talking about demonic spirit guides that will seduce the individual into the occult world.

Another example is found in a college level textbook that is most often used on the freshman level. The text *Becoming A*

Master Student includes a chapter titled “You create it all” in which students are told that they create everything including the lectures they attend, the textbooks, their instructors, and their classmates. All those things they are absolutely certain they do not control the weather, wars, world hunger, the planets in actuality, they create those, too.

Our response is obvious: we must speak on behalf of our children in the educational arena. Unless we achieve this goal, we will have emotionally and spiritually lost the battle for our childrens’ future.

A Biblical Response

Transformation is the key element in the recipe to bring about the New Age. Change must take place in the lives of individuals as well as society. The New Ager sees his transformation as his becoming one with the universe, and as equal with all therefore, he has no need for a savior. He becomes more and more introspective as he looks within himself for answers, guidance, and so on.

Likewise, transformation is an important element in Christianity. The Christian is to be transformed (Rom. 12:2) from within, thereby presenting himself wholly acceptable to God. We are new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17), with a new nature (Eph. 4:24). This inward transformation, a renewing of the mind, results in an outward expression of care and concern for others.

For the New Ager, transformation is an open door to the occult world; for the Christian,transformation is the process whereby the believer becomes more Christlike.

God has called us out of darkness to become sons and daughters of His Light, His Truth, and His Kingdom (John 3:19-21). The New Age world lies in darkness, and God is calling the

Christian to bring a candle and penetrate the darkness.

Evangelizing the New Ager

When witnessing to a New Ager it is helpful to begin your discussion on a topic of common interest where you share a compatible view. In so doing you establish a non-threatening precedent for fair treatment in your communication.

Issues that may be common to both parties the rejection of humanism, human rights, or ecology would be a good place to begin your discussion. Remember your goal is to be a positive witness and to proclaim the saving grace of Jesus. Consider these points for effective witnessing:

• Pray that God will give you direction as you share.

• Always define one another's terms and establish a biblical reference. This is necessary even though New Agers will be unlikely to accept the Bible as authoritative.

• Stress the uniqueness of Jesus as the Savior and His resurrection as proof of His true divinity.

• Remember that arguing is not a positive witness. It is important to share your personal relationship with the Lord. A personal relationship with Jesus is virtually impossible for the New Ager since he views God as being impersonal.

• Look for opportunities to present Jesus as a person who is knowable and who desires a relationship.

• Help him recognize the reality of evil and see that Jesus is his only avenue of escape.

• Show him that man's problem is sin and not ignorance of his personal divinity. The New Ager must realize that because of his personal sin he is unable to escape the reality of separation from God. Jesus, as the only sinless Son of God, is the answer.

Salvation for the New Ager is oneness with all of creation. You want him to understand not only God’s grace, but also Christ’s sacrifice on the cross which was sufficient for the New Ager as well.

This New Age of Aquarius that is to come upon the scene in the near future has eroded much of the Christian consensus that was once held. The challenge of the Christian church is great, but it must be met. If not, our culture will increasingly return to paganism.

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