

# The All-Powerful God

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines the important doctrine of the omnipotence of God, and what it means for God to be all-powerful.*

## Introducing Omnipotence

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would give birth to Israel's promised Messiah, she was stunned. After all, she was a virgin. How could she possibly give birth to a son? But the angel informed her that God's power was more than sufficient to accomplish such a thing, "for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37; NIV).



A foundational element of a Christian worldview is a proper view of God. This article is about God's omnipotence. Although the term may sound a bit intimidating, it simply means that God is all-powerful. A number of scriptural passages speak to this issue.

For example, through the prophet Jeremiah God warned the people of Judah that because of their wickedness their land would soon be conquered by the Babylonians (Jer. 32:26-35). Nevertheless, God also promised that he would one day restore his people to their land and bless them with great prosperity (Jer. 32:37-44). As if to make clear that the Lord was completely able to fulfill his promise, the context twice leads us to reflect upon the fact that nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17, 27). The text, therefore, seems to clearly indicate that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent.

This power is revealed in a number of different ways. For example, the creation of the universe reveals his "eternal

power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus reveals his “mighty strength,” which not only raised Christ from the dead, but which seated him at the right hand of God, “far above all . . . power and dominion” (Eph. 1:18-23). Finally, his might is also revealed in the gospel, which the apostle Paul described as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

In fact, He is often referred to as God *Almighty*. In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders who are seated before the throne of God fall on their faces and worship the Lord declaring, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign” (Rev. 11:17).

The cumulative picture is indeed a grand one—and quite naturally leads to the believer’s affirmation that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But how is this attribute to be understood? What exactly does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? These are some of the questions with which we’ll grapple in the remainder of this article.

## Omnipotence and Creation

The Apostle’s Creed begins, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>{1}</sup> Not only does this statement affirm a central (and biblical) Christian truth-claim, namely, that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), it also clearly links this affirmation with God’s attribute of omnipotence by referring to him as “God the Father *almighty*.” By linking God’s omnipotence with creation in this way, the creed reaffirms what the Apostle Paul had previously taught in his letter to the Romans, that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen in what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

But why does the Bible, and Christian tradition, link God’s

omnipotence with creation in this way? One of the most important reasons is to be found in the Christian doctrine of creation itself. You see, unlike certain pagan doctrines of creation, which taught that the universe was *formed* out of pre-existent matter, Christianity teaches that God *created* the universe out of nothing. And when we say that God created the universe “out of nothing,” we are claiming, as the theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, that the universe “is not created out of anything.” Rather, “it came into being through the absolute fiat of God’s Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into being.”[\[2\]](#)

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”[\[3\]](#) Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.[\[4\]](#)

This is why omnipotence and creation are so closely linked in the Christian tradition. It’s one thing to merely *form* a universe out of pre-existent matter. It is another thing entirely to *create* a universe out of absolutely nothing! As Christian philosophers Paul Copan and Bill Craig observe, “It is difficult to imagine any more stunning display of God’s almighty power than the world’s springing into being out of nothing, at his mere command.”[\[5\]](#)

## Omnipotence and Morality

Now you might be thinking that if God is all-powerful, then he can do absolutely anything. But if we adopt this understanding of omnipotence, we quickly run into conflict with the teaching of Scripture, for Scripture tells us plainly that there are

some things God cannot do.

For example, in Numbers 23:19 we read: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" According to this text, God is not the sort of being to tell a lie. When he makes a promise, we can be confident that he will keep it, because God does not lie (see also 1 Sam. 15:29 and Tit. 1:2).

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, "it is impossible for God to lie" by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is "firm and secure" (Heb. 6:18-19).

But if we say that God cannot lie, or break a promise, or do anything else that is morally evil, then haven't we denied that God is all-powerful? Not necessarily. The vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the history of the church have consistently taught that God's omnipotence does not include the ability to do that which is logically impossible or contradictory.

Of course, there is no contradiction in saying that an omnipotent being can commit a morally evil act. But there does seem to be a contradiction in saying that a completely good, morally perfect being can perform such an act. As a morally perfect being, God not only has no moral faults, but as James reminds us, he cannot even be tempted by sin and evil (James 1:13). Hence, as one Christian philosopher observes, "for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what is impossible for that being to do."[\[6\]](#) And clearly, the inability to do what is morally evil should not be seen as detracting from God's omnipotence.

Instead, it should be viewed as exalting his moral perfection.

## Omnipotence and Freedom

We've seen that omnipotence cannot mean that God can do absolutely *anything*. For as a morally perfect being, God is incapable of doing what is morally evil. This might lead us to think that God can do anything that is consistent with his morally perfect nature. But most theologians would still reject such a view. They would insist that some things are just logically impossible and that it can't count against God's omnipotence to admit that he cannot do such things.

Let's consider an example. A square is a geometrical object with four angles. A triangle has only three. This being so, what do you think the chances are of constructing a square triangle? Not very good, right? After all, if something has four angles, then it has more than three. And if it has only three angles, then it has less than four. Regardless of how much power one has, a square triangle is a *logical* impossibility.

With this in mind, let's now consider another example. Suppose that John is the kind of person who, if married, would *always* freely seek his wife's input before making any major financial decision. If this is true, then it would seem that not even God could create John, place him in such circumstances, and have him freely *refrain* from seeking his wife's input—for this is simply *not* what John would *freely* do in such circumstances.

Of course, God still has plenty of options. He could always refuse to create John, or refuse to let him get married, or refuse to let him be confronted with a major financial decision. Alternatively, God could put John in the circumstances we're considering, but *make* him decide not to seek his wife's input. But what he cannot do is place John in these circumstances and then *make* him *freely* decide not to

seek his wife's input. For to *make* John *freely* do something is as logically impossible as creating a square triangle.{7}

Of course, God's inability to perform a logically impossible task can't fairly count against his omnipotence. For this would suggest "that a task has been specified, that transcends the capacities . . . of Omnipotence. But no task at all has been specified by uttering a self-contradictory . . . mixture of words." {8} So we needn't worry that we've abandoned the doctrine of omnipotence by admitting that God cannot perform meaningless tasks! We've simply clarified the meaning of omnipotence.

## The Importance of Omnipotence

The doctrine that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is, as one philosopher has observed, "not a bit of old metaphysical luggage that can be abandoned with relief." Instead, it's "indispensable for Christianity." After all, God has made many wonderful promises to his people. But if he "were not almighty . . . he might . . . sincerely promise, but find fulfillment beyond his power." {9} So only if God is omnipotent can we confidently bank on his promises. But this is a bit of a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the doctrine of God's omnipotence can be very comforting for believers, who are rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. After all, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Whatever problems and difficulties we face in life, our omnipotent God has more than enough power to see us through. If he chooses, he can easily deliver us from fire or water, sword or famine, sickness or disease. And if he lets us go through such things, he can provide all the grace and strength we need to endure. While the suffering of God's saints can indeed be great, we must also remember that this life is not the end of our story, for "in keeping with his promise we are

looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:11). A promise our omnipotent God is more than able to fulfill!

On the other hand, however, an omnipotent Deity is a most frightening prospect for anyone who persists in spurning his love and grace. For as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we are each "destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (9:27) and "it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31)—especially when that God is all-powerful! It's a sobering thought to remind ourselves that not one of us can ultimately escape God's power and judgment. If we make the omnipotent God our enemy, then no one can deliver us from his hand.

Thankfully, however, peace with God is available to anyone who wants it. The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He pleads with men to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). "Whoever is thirsty," he says, "let him come . . . let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17b). The omnipotent God offers us all good things in Christ—and nothing can prevent him making good on his offer!

## Notes

1. John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 24.
2. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 207; cited in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 14.
3. P. C. W. Davies, "Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology," in *The Study of Time III*, ed. J. T. Fraser (New York: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78-79; cited in Copan and Craig, *Creation out*

*of Nothing*, 222.

4. Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 223.

5. Ibid., 26.

6. Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 367.

7. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 539.

8. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), s.v. "impossibility."

9. All of these citations are taken from P. T. Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48, no. 183 (1973): 8.

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## Free Indeed!

Recently I had the privilege of speaking in a women's prison. I shared my story which I call, "[How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change](#)." (How's that for a topic of interest for incarcerated people?)





But then I was able to speak briefly about what we have in common, a situational loss of freedom. I have lost the ability—the freedom—to walk, and they have temporarily lost the ability—the freedom—to walk out of lockup. Still, even while imprisoned by our situations, Jesus offers *true freedom*

that has nothing to do with our circumstances. He promised to His disciples, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He even said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:32, 36)

So what does THAT mean?

What was so crazy great about this opportunity to speak to and hug and love on the precious ladies in the women’s prison, was that the previous weekend I had given four messages on freedom at a women’s retreat at sea. (You can listen to the recordings [here](#), if you like.) So many facets of freedom were already rolling around in my head as I thought about Jesus’ offer of freedom to women in prison.

- As we look at our past, Jesus can set us free from guilt when we confess our sins and receive His forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9). He can set us free from shame, that feeling of not just *making* a mistake, but *being* a mistake, when we receive His gift of honor as He showers pleasure and acceptance on us.

- As we look at our present, Jesus can set us free from the “tapes” of lies and misbeliefs that control our lives, as we replace the lies with His truths. For example, a number of the ladies at the retreat had lived in bondage to the lie that

<u>Lies/Misbeliefs</u>	<u>Truth</u>
“If I mess up, that would be the end of the world. I have to be perfect.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Only God is perfect</li><li>❖ He has promised to hold my hand when I stumble.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Psalm 18:35</li><li>❖ Psalm 73:23</li></ul></li><li>❖ I am longing for Eden</li></ul>

they had to be perfect in order to be acceptable. The weight of needing to be perfect is soul-killing because it's impossible for imperfect people to be perfect! But we can be set free by embracing the truth that only God is perfect, so we can let go of the unrealistic expectation that we can ever live perfectly this side of heaven. God knows we will stumble, and He has promised to hold our hand when we do. And beyond that, He understands our longing for perfection is actually a longing for the perfect home of Eden, which we will get to experience on the New Earth we read about in the book of Revelation.

- We can walk in the breathtaking freedom from the soul-crushing imprisonment of unforgiveness by forgiving those who have hurt or offended us. The weight of others' sins against us is bad enough, but Jesus said that if we refuse to forgive, we will be subject to tormentors—demonic torturers (Matthew 18:34-35). When we release our offenders over to Jesus for Him to deal with, we are set free—free indeed!

- As we think about the future, there is glorious freedom when we trust God instead of being controlled by fear. So often, we are in bondage to fear because we want to be in control. We forget that we are not God, wanting to manage not only our own lives but the lives of others. There is freedom in trusting

God instead of trying to control others.

- Proverbs 29:25 assures us that fear of man is a snare. This isn't talking about being afraid of people like some are afraid of heights, or the dark, or spiders. Fear of man is about working for other people's approval and fearing their disapproval. When we look to Jesus, though, we see how He modelled living for "an audience of One," caring only about pleasing His Father (John 8:29). When we follow Christ's example, living to please the Father instead of fickle people, there is freedom! I can personally attest to this. Because of my stubborn attachment to a biblical sexual ethic, I have been slimed online by people who despise God's standards. The slime slides off, though, when I keep my focus on the Lord and, like Jesus in Hebrews 12:2, I can "despise the shame" by refusing to accept it. That's what freedom feels like!

- There is true freedom in accepting God's choices for our lives: personality and temperament, introversion or extroversion, health limitations, even capacity. (Some people naturally have a "gallon" energy tank, while others naturally have a cup.) Resenting and fighting God's choices—even gender!—leads to expending mental and emotional energy that is restricting and costly. But embracing God's right to make these decisions for our design and our lives, laying down our non-existent "right" to define ourselves the way WE want, brings us freedom.

<i>Lies/Misbeliefs</i>	<i>Truth</i>
"My parents' problems were my fault."	❖ I don't have that kind of power.
"I am responsible for my parents (or my children's) happiness."	❖ Each one bears his own load – Gal 6:5
	❖ Each one is responsible for his own choices – Ezek. 18

- One of my dear friends discovered, in the process of working through the challenges of parenting a prodigal adult child, that there is freedom in owning 100% of our own part and 0% of other people's choices and behaviors. There's no point in taking on

guilt or responsibility for someone else's choices; they are completely responsible for their part.

- And finally (though definitely not exhaustively), we are free to choose our attitudes. We can decide to either live in bondage to an attitude of entitlement or a continual expectation of the negative, or live in freedom by developing an attitude of gratitude. I love Dr. Charles Swindoll's poem on Attitude:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude  
on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts.

It is more important than the past,  
than education, than money,  
than circumstances, than failure, than successes,  
than what other people think or say or do.

It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill.  
It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice  
everyday regarding the attitude  
we will embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past . . .  
we cannot change the fact that people  
will act in a certain way.

We cannot change the inevitable.  
The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have,  
and that is our attitude.  
I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me  
and 90% of how I react to it.  
And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our Attitudes.  
It's possible to be "free indeed." Regardless of your  
circumstances. Choose the freedom Jesus offers!

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/free\\_indeed](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/free_indeed) on July 25,  
2017.

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## **“Which Countries Deny Religious Freedom?”**

I understand there are six countries who deny religious freedom. I have Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and North Korea. Is this list correct? Are there more, or is this complete?

Your list is accurate, but I think it might be better to list the countries that deny any form of freedom to their citizens. Each year Freedom House posts a list of the countries that are free, partially free, or not free. You can see the list and the map of the world on their Web site ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)).

The list of not free countries is very long. Here is the 2001-2002 list just of the countries whose names start with the first letters of the alphabet:

Afghanistan  
Algeria  
Angola  
Bahrain  
Belarus  
Bhutan  
Brunei  
Burma  
Burundi  
Cambodia  
Cameroon  
Chad  
China  
Congo  
Cuba

As you can see, the list is very long of countries that deny freedom (religious freedom or other freedoms).

Addendum added March 25, 2015:

A better place to get a handle on religious freedom is [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov) which is the site of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Freedom House site deals more with political freedom rather than religious freedom. From the 2015 report, we get the following summary of the nations who are particularly offensive to the ideas of religious liberty.

*The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent federal advisory body the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) created to monitor religious freedom abuses abroad, released its 2014 Annual Report, and recommended that the State Department add eight more nations to its list of "countries of particular concern," defined under law as countries where particularly severe violations of religious freedom are tolerated or perpetrated: **Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.***



*USCIRF also recommended that the following eight countries be re-designated as “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan.*

Kerby Anderson

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# **“Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?” – Did My Sin Re-crucify Christ?**

**Please help—I’m really worried Jesus won’t forgive me. I regressed and viewed a pornographic image. While praying for forgiveness a voice in my mind said it hurt like nails and that I had re-crucified Christ and that there was no sacrifice left for me. I’d heard of this verse but now I’m really worried is there any hope of forgiveness for me. Please, I’m worried really bad.**

Sounds to me like you were hearing from a demon who was sending what scripture calls a “fiery dart” at you. Yes, your sin hurt the Lord. (Sometimes the Enemy throws some truth into the midst of his lies.) No, you did not crucify Christ because if you recall, His last words on the cross before He died were “it is finished,” or actually more accurately, “it is paid in full.” Lord Jesus fully paid for your sin of looking at porn 2000 years ago.

And no, it is not true that there is no sacrifice left for you. The verse you are thinking of is Hebrews 10:26, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the

knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.” But consider that equally true is the promise of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

When a born-again Christian sins, God promises to forgive us. What you are exhibiting is the regret and remorse that shows God is continuing to give you the grace of repentance. The people Jesus doesn't forgive are the hard-hearted ones who refuse to ask for it.

Concerning Hebrews 10:26, listen to what theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem says about this verse:

*“A person who rejects Christ’s salvation and ‘has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him’ (Hebrews 10:29) deserves eternal punishment. This again is a strong warning against falling away, but it should not be taken as proof that someone who has truly been born again can lose his or her salvation. When the author talks about the blood of the covenant ‘that sanctified him,’ the word sanctified is used simply to refer to ‘external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God’s people.’ The passage does not talk about someone who is genuinely saved, but someone who has received some beneficial moral influence through contact with the church.” (Bible Doctrine, p 343.)*

Be encouraged, brother. Receive God's forgiveness and cleansing according to the riches in Christ, which he has lavished on you (Eph. 1:8).

Blessings, Sue

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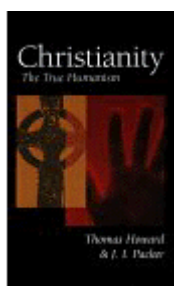


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# Christianity: The True Humanism

## Christianity and Humanism

What does it take to be human?



Does that sound like an odd question? One is human by birth, right? J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard seek to explain and answer that question in their book *Christianity: The True Humanism*.[\[1\]](#) This delightful and insightful book, first published in the mid-'80s, is now back in print. Since it provides valuable insight for apologetics—and is one of my favorites—I'd like to share a few of its insights.

To bring out a Christian view of what makes for a truly fulfilling human experience, the authors contrast it with that of secular humanism. Secular humanism is the belief that mankind can truly find itself apart from any reference to God. It seeks to elevate the human race through a confidence in our ability to understand and order our world guided by our own reason and standing on the findings and possibilities of science.

One note before continuing. Some have objected to connecting the word *humanism* with *Christian*. Doesn't it suggest the exaltation of people? If you are familiar with either of the authors, you'll know that isn't their intent at all. As they

say, "This book is an attempt to describe the sense in which the Christian religion both undergirds and nourishes all that seems to mark our true humanness."[\[2\]](#)

Because *Christianity: The True Humanism* explores the meaning of Christianity for the human experience, it adds to our apologetic for the faith. The authors write: "The best defense of any position is a creative exposition of it, and certainly that is the best means of persuading others that it is true."[\[3\]](#)

What Do We Need to be Human?

So, what *do* we need to live a full life? It might be hard to get started answering that, but once the answers start they come in a rush. A sense of identity is one thing we need. How about adequate food, companionship, peace, beauty, goodness, and love? Freedom, a recognition by others of one's dignity, some measure of cultural awareness, and a worthy object of veneration also fill certain needs. Recreation, a sense of one's own significance, and meaning in life are a few more.

Animals don't seem to be concerned about most of these things. As the authors say, "Once you get a dog fed he can manage. Give a puffin or a gazelle freedom to range around and it will cope without raising any awkward questions about esteem and meaning."[\[4\]](#)

Far from being a religion of escape which calls people away from the realities of life, as critics are wont to say, Christianity calls us to plunge in to the issues that matter most and see how the answer is found in Jesus Christ. The good things in life are pursued with God's blessing. The difficult things are taken in and worked through, leaving the results to God. Here there is no need for submerging oneself in a bottle of alcohol to relieve the stress, no approval for running from the faults of a failing spouse into the arms of another, no

settling for a grimy existence from which there is no escape but death.

What is the testimony of saints around us and those who've gone before us? "If what the saints tell us is true," say the authors, "Christian vision illuminates the whole of our experience with incomparable splendor. Far from beckoning us away from raw human experience, this vision opens up to us its full richness, depth, and meaning."[\[5\]](#) They tell us that to run into the arms of Christ is not to run away from one's humanness, but to find out what it means to be fully human. Even our imaginations give testimony that there is more to life than drudgery; we might try to walk machine-like through life ignoring its difficulties, but our imaginations keep bringing us back. There is something bigger. "Our imaginations insist that if it all comes to nothing then existence itself is an exquisite cheat,"[\[6\]](#) for it keeps drawing us higher.

In this article we'll consider four issues—freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—as we explore what it means to be fully human.

## Freedom

What does freedom mean to you? When you find yourself wishing to be free, what is it you want? Are you a harried supervisor facing demands from your superiors and lack of cooperation from your subordinates? Freedom to you might mean no demands from above and no obligations below. Are you a student? Freedom might mean no more course requirements, no more nights spent hunched over a desk while others are out having a good time.

My Webster's dictionary gives as its first definition of freedom: "not under the control of some other person or some arbitrary power; able to act or think without compulsion or arbitrary restriction."[\[7\]](#) To be free is thus to be able to do something without unreasonable restriction. Of course what

will constitute the experience of freedom will vary from person to person according to our interests and desires. But are there any commonalities rooted in human nature which will inform everyone's understanding of freedom?

## A Christian View of Freedom

When we think about freedom we typically focus on our external circumstances which hinder us from doing what we want. If only our circumstances were different we could *really* be free. But if freedom lies primarily in being able to do as we please, very few of us will ever know it. So, freedom can be very elusive; it comes in fits and snatches, and too often our sights are set on things outside our reach anyway.

Given the contrast between the dimensions of our dreams and the restrictions we face, is it possible for anyone to truly be free? It is when we understand our true nature and what we were meant to be and do.

Let's first distinguish between *subjective* freedom and *objective* freedom. *Subjective* freedom is that psychological sense of contentment and fulfillment which comes with doing the best we know and want to do. *Objective* freedom is that condition of being in a situation well-suited to our own makeup which provides for our doing the best thing. It lies, in other words, in being and doing what we were meant to be and do. Like the car engine that is free when the pistons can move up and down unhindered—and not flop wildly in all directions—we, too, are free when we operate according to our makeup and design.

Because we were created by God according to His plan, freedom results from aligning ourselves with God's design. This requires understanding human nature generally so we can know those things which are best for all people, and understanding ourselves individually so we can know what we are best suited

to be and do. This understanding of human nature and of ourselves is then subjected to the law of love in service to others. Because we are made like God, we are made to do for others; to sacrifice for the good of other people. It is God's love which has set us free, and which enables us to let go of our own self-interests in order to reach out to others. This is true freedom in the objective sense. "When nothing and no one can stop you from loving, then you are free in the profoundest sense."[\[8\]](#) But this means being free from any desires of our own which would hinder us from doing those things for others we should be doing.

This focus on love of others contrasts sharply with what we're told in modern society, that freedom means focusing on ourselves. "It is the stark opposite of all egocentrism, self-interest, avarice, pride, and self-assertion—the very things, so we thought, that are necessary if we are ever to wrest any freedom from this struggling, overcrowded, and oppressive world of ours."[\[9\]](#)

The key figure to observe, of course, is Jesus. We might consider Him bound by his poverty and by the rigors of His ministry. But remember that He freely accepted the Father's call to sacrifice Himself for us. His very food was to do the will of the Father. Jesus was free because He fit perfectly in the Father's plan, and there was nothing that could keep Him from accomplishing the Father's wishes which were also His *own* desire.

In summary, the freedom people long for—of being rid of expectations and restrictions so one can do what one wants—turns out to be illusory. We are free when we rid ourselves of the things which prevent us from living in obedience to the God who has loved us and given Himself for us, for this is what we were designed to do.

# Dignity

## *The Imago Dei*

One of the words seldom heard today to describe a person is *dignified*. What does that word bring to mind? Perhaps a stately looking gentleman, dressed formally and with impeccable manners . . . but looking all the world like he'd be more comfortable if he'd just relax!

Packer and Howard believe that dignity is an important component of a full humanity. Dignity is "the quality of being worthy of esteem or honor; worthiness." It refers to a "proper pride and self-respect"[\[10\]](#) True dignity is not the stuffiness of some people who think they are not part of the riff-raff of society. When we react against such arrogance we need to realize that our reaction is not against dignity itself. For it is our innate sense of the dignity of all people, no matter what their place in society, that makes such airs objectionable.

Dignity is defined objectively by our nature, and is subjectively revealed in the way we act. What is that something about us that warrants our being treated with dignity and calls for us to act dignified (in the best sense)? That something is the *imago Dei*, the image of God, which is ours by virtue of creation. We have a relationship to the Creator shared by no other creature because we are like Him. This gives us a special standing in creation, on the one hand, but makes all people equal, on the other.

Secular humanism, by contrast, sees us as just another step on the evolutionary ladder. Our dignity is dependent upon our *development* (as the highest animal currently). Although at present we might demand greater honor than animals because we're on the top, there is nothing in us by nature that makes us worthy of special honor. "By making dignity dependent upon development," Packer and Howard say, "the humanist is opening

the door to the idea that less favored, less well-developed human beings have less dignity than others and consequently less claim to be protected and kept from violation than others.”[\[11\]](#) Hence, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. One has to wonder, too, if there is a connection between we’ve been taught about our lack of natural worth by evolutionists and the lack of concern for behaving in a dignified manner in public life.

Furthermore, secular humanism treats people according to their usefulness, either actual or potential. “To be valued for oneself, as a person, is humanizing,” say the authors, “for it ennobles; but to be valued only as a hand, or a means, or a tool, of a cog in a wheel, or a convenience to someone else is dehumanizing—and it depresses. . . . Secular humanism, though claiming vast wisdom and life-enhancing skills, actually diminishes the individual, who is left in old age without dignity (because his or her social usefulness is finished) and without hope (because there is nothing now to look forward to).”[\[12\]](#)

## **Worship—Drawn Up to Full Height**

If recognizing our dignity means understanding our highest self or nature, in what kind of situation or activity is our dignity most visible? Packer and Howard say it is in worshipping God that our dignity is most fully realized.

Why is that? There are a couple of reasons. First, we are made to worship, and dignity is found in doing what we are made to do. “The final dignity of a thing is its glory—that is, the realizing of its built-in potential for good. . . . The true glory of all objects appears when they do what they were made to do.”[\[13\]](#) Like a car engine made to operate a certain way, we were made to bring all of our life’s experience into the service of glorifying God.

Second, the object of one’s worship reflects back on the

worshipper. Those who worship things lower than themselves end up demeaning themselves, being brought down to the level of their object of worship. But those who worship things higher are drawn up to reflect their object of worship. To worship God is to be drawn up to our full height, so to speak. We are ennobled by worshipping the most noble One.

## Moral Life—Marking the Dignity of Others

Does all this mean non-Christians have no dignity or aren't worthy of being treated in a dignified manner? Of course not. The authors summarize their idea this way: "To the Christian, every human being has intrinsic and inalienable dignity by virtue of being made in God's image and realizes and exhibits the full potential of that dignity only in the worship and service of the Creator."[\[14\]](#) Because of our inherent value as human beings, we all deserve to be treated in a certain way. Christians are to treat people according to their innate worth. We love people as Christ loves us. We also seek to guide them to the place of their highest fulfillment which is in Christ.

Thus, Christianity "reveals us to ourselves as the most precious and privileged of all God's creatures."[\[15\]](#) And therein lies our dignity.

## Culture

What does it mean to be cultured? In one sense it has to do with the finer things in life. People visit the great museums and cathedrals and concert halls of this and other countries, take evening classes at the local college, learn foreign languages, take up painting and pottery making as hobbies. Even those who have little interest in the fine arts have an appreciation for skilled craftsmanship.

Being cultured also can mean being well-mannered, knowing what



is considered appropriate and inappropriate in social interaction.

What is at the root of what it means to be cultured? Personal preference is part of it, if we're thinking of the arts for example. But culture goes deeper than that to matters of *taste*. "Taste is a facet of wisdom," say Packer and Howard; "it is the ability to distinguish what has value from what does not." It has to do with *appropriateness*, with fitness and value.

But how do we measure appropriateness? Traditionally we have measured it by our view of the value of humankind. Does what comes off the artist's easel in some manner elevate our humanness? Or at least does it not degrade humanity? Do we treat people in a way which shows respect for them, which is the essence of good manners? To be in good taste is to be characterized by being appropriate to the situation. With respect to culture, it is to be appropriate given our nature. On the other hand, to be in poor taste is to be "unworthy of our humanness."[\[16\]](#) To appreciate the value in people and in their creative expression is to be cultured.

Should Christians be concerned about culture? While Christianity *per se* is indifferent to matters of culture (for the message is to all people of all cultures, and we should value the contributions of all cultures), Christians ourselves aren't to be indifferent. In our daily lives we should be demonstrating habits and tastes informed by the Gospel, and these should mark whatever we put their hands to. We are to treat people with respect as having been made in God's image. We also apply ourselves creatively in imitation of God, and our creativity should reflect God's view of mankind and the world. Our creative activity in this world is what some refer to as the "cultural mandate." "When man harnesses the powers and resources of the world around him to build a culture and so enrich community life, he is fulfilling this mandate," say our authors.[\[17\]](#) In doing this we reflect the redemptive work

God has been doing since Adam and Eve.

While, on the one hand, we should appreciate the cultural contributions of anyone which elevate mankind and more clearly reflect God's attitude toward us and our world, on the other hand we are under no obligation to accept anything and everything in the name of "creativity." We can't applaud the blasphemous or immoral. And this is where Christianity stands against secular humanism. For the latter, in its demotion of man to the level of animal and its elevation of human liberty above all transcendent standards, must allow wide freedom in creativity, whether it be crucifixes in urine or erotic performance art. But in doing so it ultimately degrades us rather than exalts us. A sweeping look at the 20th century with its horrific assaults on humanity offers a clue as to the strength of moral standards devoid of God's will.

A few important notes here. First, although the Bible doesn't teach standards of beauty, "it charges us to use our creativity to devise a pattern of life that will fitly express the substance of our godliness, for this is what subduing the earth, tending God's garden, and having dominion over the creatures means."[\[18\]](#) Second, "the Gospel is the great leveler."[\[19\]](#) There is no room for pride, for exalting one culture above others.

One final note. Even given all that has been said about the significance of culture and our contribution to it, it is important to note that the demonstration of God's goodness to those around us through love and works of service is more important than "cultural correctness." We cannot turn our nose up at those who prefer comic books to classics or rap to Bach. For to do so is to deny the foundations of all we have been talking about, the inherent value of the individual person.

## The Sacred

## Convention, Taboos, and the Divine

In his book *The New Absolutes*, William Watkins argues that people today aren't truly relativists; they've merely swapped a new set of absolutes for the old.{20} It's fairly common for conventions and taboos to change over time, rightly or wrongly. One important question we need to ask, according to Packer and Howard, is this: "Which way of doing things does a greater service to what is truly human in us?"{21}

Taboos have to do with bedrock issues of fitness and decency. Packer and Howard tell us that our many social codes of behavior are "a secular expression of our awareness of the sacred, the inviolable, the authoritative, the 'numinous' as it is nowadays called—in short, the divine."{22}

Wait a minute. Isn't it a bit of an exaggeration to talk about taboos and conventions in terms of the divine? No, say our authors, for what we are seeking in all this is what is ultimate and fixed. Wherever there are conventions or attitudes which have such binding authority over us that to disregard them is taboo, "there you have what we called the footprints of the gods—an intuition, however anonymous and unidentified, of the divine."{23} As ideas and beliefs exert authority over our spirits, they become sacred.

We are a worshiping race. Because of our createdness we naturally find ourselves looking for the transcendent (although we typically look in the wrong places, and although secularists will deny they're looking for anything higher than what we ourselves can produce). We naturally find ourselves giving obeisance to one thing or another, often without conscious thought. "You can no more have a tribe, community, or civilization without gods," say our authors, "than you can have one without customs."{24} It is the rare secularist who is never pushed to the point of offering up a prayer in hopes that there is Someone listening. An awareness of the reality of the sacred seems to be built in to us.

In our post-Christian world there are a number of substitute religions. Even secular movements like Marxism become religions of a sort with icons and symbols and sacred books. In shrinking the sacred down to our own proportions we lose what we sought, however, for as the theology becomes debased, so does the religion. And debased religion in turn debases its devotees. Note what Paul said about this in Romans chapter 1.

## The Meaning of Sacredness

With respect to God, sacredness refers to His holiness and inviolability and to the value that inheres in all He has made. He is set apart from and above us. "He is not to be profaned, insulted, defied, or treated with irreverence in any way." [\[25\]](#) God both *cannot* and *ought not* be challenged.

Furthermore, that which He has made is due a measure of honor, and those things which are set apart for special service are deserving of special honor. We wouldn't think of tearing up the original copy of the Constitution of the United States or of splashing paint on the Mona Lisa. Likewise—but even more so—we shouldn't think of abusing that which has come from the Maker's hand or treating that which has been set apart for His use as cheap. Here's an example of the latter: How many of us think of our church buildings and their furnishings as sacred in any sense? We no longer have the Temple; but are buildings erected expressly for the purpose of God's service really just cinder blocks and wood?

## Sin and the Sacred

If we aren't to treat the objects of this world as less than they deserve, much less should we mistreat those who have been made in His image. To sin against others is to violate their sacredness and our own, for in doing so "we profane and defile

the sacred reality of God's image in us." [\[26\]](#)

For the secularist, as we've said before, without God all things have functional value only. As things or people outlive their usefulness they are to be discarded. The unborn who are malformed are of no use; they can be discarded. So, for example, the aged, now costing society rather than contributing to it, are to be assisted in death. But not so for the Christian. In taking seriously the sacredness of God and of what He has made, we preserve ourselves and provide protection against those things and ideas that would lessen or destroy us.

Freedom, dignity, culture, and the sacred—four aspects of the human experience. When we look at the Christian worldview and at secularism, it is clear which provides the greater promise for mankind. It is Christianity, and not secularism, which provides for human life in its fullness.

## Notes

1. J. I. Packer and Thomas Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Berkhamsted, Herts, England: Word Publishing, 1985).
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Ibid., 39.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "free."
8. Packer and Howard, 60.
9. Ibid., 68.
10. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (1999), s.v. "dignity."
11. Packer and Howard, 138-39.
12. Ibid., 160.

13. Ibid., 152.
14. Ibid., 155.
15. Ibid., 160.
16. Ibid., 167.
17. Ibid., 177.
18. Ibid., 178.
19. Ibid., 172.
20. William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996). An article I wrote on this book can be found at Probe's Web site at [www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/](http://www.probe.org/the-new-absolutes/). This article was reprinted in Jerry Solomon, ed., *Arts, Entertainment, and Christian Values: Probing the Headlines That Impact Your Family* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000).
21. Packer and Howard., 187.
22. Ibid., 187-88.
23. Ibid., 189.
24. Ibid., 188.
25. Ibid., 195.
26. Ibid., 206.