Looking for God

Looking for God

> *If God had a name, what would it be?*
> *And would you call it to His face?*
> *If you were faced with Him in all His glory,*
> *What would you ask if you had just one question?*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*

God has made a comeback in pop music in recent years. In her song "One of Us," Joan Osborne wonders what we might ask God if we stood face-to-face with Him.{1} Writer Tom Beaudoin sees a spilled pitcher of milk in the music video for R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" as a symbol of the loss of religious authority in the lives of Gen-Xers.{2} Madonna's video for the song "Like a Prayer" is full of religious symbolism: an altar, a crucifix, candles, and other icons.{3}

Tom Beaudoin, a member of Generation X himself, says his generation is "strikingly religious." They express their spirituality through pop culture rather than through institutional religion.{4}The shift from the word *religion* to *spirituality* is significant here. Having lost confidence in institutional religion to provide satisfactory answers to important issues, Xers look elsewhere; often mixing ideas and religious expressions from a variety of sources as each person chooses for him or herself what to believe.

Beaudoin says Xers are on an "irreverent spiritual quest." Feeling abandoned by parents, churches, politicians, and even technology, they seek their own path in finding meaning for their lives. Campus minister Jimmy Long writes, "Xers are twice as likely as people in [the Boomer] generation to be children of divorce. Between 1960 and 1979 the American

divorce rate tripled." He continues, "Fifty percent of today's teenagers are not living with both birth parents."{5}

Looking outside the home, Xers feel let down as they look at what the Boomer generation left them.{6} They were alarmed by the TV movie *The Day After* that was about the results of nuclear war. The spaceship Challenger blew up shortly after takeoff; Watergate was fresh in our cultural memory; environmentalists were pointing to the severe damage to nature caused by technology. Xers thus see themselves as fixers, as those who have to clean up the mess preceding generations made. But since their own backgrounds were often so difficult, many simply hope to take charge of their own lives.

Finding little stability around them to give them any confidence that there is such a thing a objective truth which remains the same, and thus no ultimate truth which makes sense of everything, they feel the burden of providing their own meaning of life and establishing their own moral standards. Jimmy Long quotes Eric, a Gen-Xer who speaks of the stress this puts on him. "There's too much pressure from outside," he says.

> *"Life gets pretty complicated when you have to think carefully about everything you do, deciding for yourself whether it's right or wrong. In the end there can be so many conflicts going on inside of you that you can't do anything, it becomes impossible to be happy with what you think at any point."{7}*

As a result of all this, when they want to find their place in this world, Xers turn to friends. Their small communities of friends provide a structure for truth and meaning. Consensus means more with respect to "truth" than logic and facts.{8} "Busters process truth relationally rather than propositionally," say Celek and Zander.{9} The emphasis on community in Xer culture reveals their desire to get along,

not get ahead; to connect, not conquer.{10}

The modernistic search for utopia without invoking God has been turned on its head with the Buster generation. Their horizons and ambitions might be smaller than those of their parents, but they have an openness to the transcendent that their parents didn't have. Spirituality is now an accepted aspect of life; Xers are open to a sense of fellowship with something bigger than themselves.

In his collection of short stories, *Life After God*, Doug Coupland allows a man he calls Scout to tell about himself and his small group of friends. Scout tells about the early, carefree days of fun and camaraderie, a time of living in paradise in which "any discussion of transcendental ideas [was] pointless."{11} As time went by, however, they all saw their dreams fade in the realities of everyday life. Scout had this to say about his life:

> *Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked—away from this person I became—either against my will or by default. . . .*

He continues:

> *Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.{12}*

This first fully postmodern generation needs to understand that they aren't alone: we *all* need God.The good news is that God has not left us wandering in a dark place but has come looking for us. He is not aloof, off making other worlds, or too busy gussying up heaven to notice us down here. He has taken on our flesh and become one of us. What if God *was* one of us, Joan Osborne? He was! He looked like us, hurt like us, laughed like us. In this article I'm going to look at some of the characteristics of this God who became like us, to show how He has the answers Xers need.

God: A Person Who Sees and Feels

> *If God had a face, what would it look like?*
> *And would you want to see,*
> *If seeing meant that you would have to believe,*
> *In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints,*
> *And all the Prophets and . . .*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*
> *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah"* {13}

What *does* God look like? He doesn't have a physical body. But what does He "look" like character-wise? Those of us born before Gen-X have a hard time understanding that many in this generation have no real understanding of the God of the Bible, the one in whom we ask them to commit their very souls. Who *is* this God, anyway? Let's consider some of His characteristics.

A Person, Not a Force

First of all God is a *Person*, not some Star Wars "force." Because we're created in His image we can learn some things about Him from looking at ourselves. As we are persons, He is a Person. "He possesses life, self-consciousness, freedom, purpose, intelligence, and emotion,"{14} just like us. Thus it

could rightly be said that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham could be called “the friend of God” (James 2:23). One cannot be a friend with a “force.” Because God is a Person He can be involved in our lives, unlike a force, which cannot relate to us on a personal level.

One Who Sees . . .

Furthermore, this is a God who *sees*. The Bible teaches, “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.” (Prov. 15:3) We’re told that He knows completely. God knows when the sparrow falls from the sky; He even knows the number of hairs on our heads! (Matt. 10:29-31)

More importantly, God knows our hearts (Acts 1:24). Those who recognize their need see this as great news. If, on the other hand, this makes us fearful because we know the badness in our hearts, we’re also told that “He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust” (Psa. 103:14). God doesn’t look for those who meet His standard, for none of us can. He looks for the one who will believe and then obey. In fact, it’s at the place of our greatest need that He meets us.

. . . With a Father’s Eyes

Beyond that, God presents Himself to us as a father, as *the* Father. Unlike many fathers today, God takes His fatherhood seriously. He provides for our needs (Matt. 7:11). Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, God looks for the one who strayed away; not wishing that any should remain lost. There’s a story in the New Testament about a father whose younger son asks for his inheritance only to squander it on wild living. He winds up feeding pigs to earn his food. Finally, he comes to his senses and returns home, prepared to be as one of the hired men, to give up his rights as a son. As he is

approaching his home, his father sees him coming down the road. In his joy, the father gathers up his robe and runs down the road to embrace the son (and in those days men didn't typically act in such an undignified way), and he welcomes his son home. The father in the story represents God the Father.

One Who Feels

Even more than seeing, God *feels.* He truly "knows our pain." In Jesus, we see a God who weeps over the hardness of His people, who has compassion on those who are sick and on those caught in sin. He knows the feeling of rejection, having been rejected even by those who were close to him. When he was put to death by crucifixion he felt the weight of sin even though he had never sinned. And while bearing our sin, he felt forsaken by God, alienated, as it were, from his own Father.

In short, God is a Person who reveals Himself as the Father who knows all about us, as one who understands our hurts and who cares. This is a God who is in touch. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Reaches Out

Loves and Cares

The character Scout in Doug Coupland's book, *Life Without God,* says he needs God. One reason, he says, is "to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."{15} The implication, of course, is that God has the capacity to help people love. To do this He must be a God of love Himself.

The Bible says that God *is* love (I John 4:8,16). It is a part of His very *nature* to love. This love is shown throughout Scripture in God's dealings with His people. Some critics see

God in the Old Testament as angry and vengeful. But they are selectively focusing on the actions of a just and holy God in responding to wrongdoing. They overlook the love of God poured out on His people as He cared for them, protected them, and provided for their needs. *Lovingkindness* is a word used many times in descriptions of God. “But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,” (Ps. 86:15).

This love isn’t just for the elite, for “super people.” God cares for the “regular people.” “For there is no partiality with God,” the Bible says (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34). In fact, He chastises His people for treating the influential differently than others (James 2:1-7), and for attending to all their religious duties, but not demonstrating true love to those in need. “Learn to do right!” He says. “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:17). The second greatest commandment, in fact, is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27-37), and our neighbor is anyone who is in need. Jesus reached out to the outsiders: the prostitutes, the lepers, and the poor. Those who knew their problems were the one’s most drawn to him.

Reaches Out by Identifying and Drawing Near

What this reveals is a God that doesn’t stand aloof, but who draws near. From the beginning of the human race, He has been reaching out to us. When the first people sinned, God took the initiative to repair the breach. He established the people of Israel, and constantly sought after them, even when they were in open rebellion. This was all a precursor to God’s most astonishing move. His love for us was so great that He chose to become one of us; He didn’t stay apart from us, but rather He identified with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although he was God, He emptied Himself, and was “made in

human likeness," and became a servant (Phil. 2:7).

As the shepherd searches for his sheep, God came looking for us. "Being in very nature God," the Bible says, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus became a man so he could bring mankind to Himself. And He did it by becoming one of us. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Receives, Redeems, Reconciles, and Restores

Receives

One of the problems many Gen-Xers have is the feeling that they aren't acceptable. The child saw the departure of a parent through divorce as a personal rejection. Such familial rejection, whether real or just perceived, colors a child's attitude about himself and his acceptability. Sadly enough, many Gen-Xers deal with feelings of shame, thinking they aren't good enough. "If Dad or Mom left, I must not be worth much," they think.

Even in cases where both parents were present, children were often left to raise themselves because of their parents' jobs. "They were the first full-blown 'latchkey children,'" say Celek and Zander, "coming home to a house where nobody was home."{16} What might at first seem like wonderful freedom often resulted in fear and a sense of aloneness. Even day care wasn't always enough to relieve the sense of being alone. Again, this felt like abandonment to many kids.

God isn't like fallen people, however. He receives anyone who

will come to Him. He never turns anyone away, and He never leaves. We need not fear enemies from without, difficult tasks ahead, or the lack of provision for our needs (Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Heb. 13:5). “I will never fail you or forsake you,” is His promise, a promise that has been affirmed by His people for centuries.

Redeems

The value God places on us is revealed by the fact of Jesus’ death by crucifixion. By His death He *redeemed* us; He bought us out of slavery only to make us children of God. We are no longer “owned” by our old way of life. The slave standing on the block has been bought and paid for—not to remain as a slave but to become a child! The price we couldn’t pay, Jesus did.

Reconciles

Gen Xers can have problems getting close to people because of the rejection they have felt. After all, for many, even parents were aloof from them; why should they get close to others? They may not feel like they *can* get close to others.

We’re told in the book of Romans that God has taken the initiative to bring us close to Him, to reconcile us to Himself. Whereas formerly we were alienated from Him, now we can come near to Him in open communication. “We have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ,” the apostle Paul wrote (Rom. 5:1). God breaks down the walls for us.

Restores

Once our sin is taken care of through faith in Christ and we are reconciled with God we begin the process of being restored in the image of Christ. There is a fundamental change in us when our spirits are made alive through Christ. Building upon that, the Spirit of God begins slowly changing us from the inside out, conforming us to the image of Jesus, and making us

like Him. This restoration will be complete when we are with Him.

Summed Up in the Cross and Resurrection

All this is summed up in the work of Jesus on the cross. He paid the ultimate price for us, and enabled us to be reconciled to the Father. And we're told that in His death He called all people to Himself (John 12:32). Furthermore, when He rose from the grave, coming to life never to die again, He showed us what our hope is: our own resurrection, revealing our full restoration in His image. This restoration begins here on earth through the work of God's Spirit in us. It will be made complete when we are raised up, never to die again.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see God receiving, redeeming, reconciling, and restoring. God has done the work. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Can be Trusted

When those who are the most important to them have lied to people, they become distrustful. David Hocking tells of a woman who, after her parents had divorced, had been put in a special institution. Her parents rarely visited. When she was old enough to be on her own she began wandering from town to town, experiencing abuse and broken promises. As a result she didn't trust anyone. Rev. Hocking says, "As I began telling her of God's love for her, she asked, 'Can He be trusted?' I answered, 'Of course. He's God!' She countered, 'Why should I trust Him? Everyone else has let me down!'{17}

What does it take to build trust in a person? Hocking gives three factors: telling the truth, doing what is right and fair, and being reliable. Do these characteristics describe God?

Tells the Truth

Because God is holy or separate from all that is sinful, He is morally pure. As such He cannot lie. “It is *impossible* for God to lie,” says the New Testament (Heb. 6:18). If He says He will do something, He will do it (Num. 23:19). The people of Israel discovered that God was true to His word in fulfilling His promises. He gave them the land He had promised them, and over and over He spared them when they turned away from Him because of the covenant He had made with their forefathers. And because He cannot lie, those who believe can rest in the promises of His constant presence and of eternity with Him (Titus 1:2; Matt. 28:20).

Does What is Right and Fair

We also can count on God to do what is fair or just. If He couldn’t be depended on to do that, we would have no reason to trust Him. What if He arbitrarily changed the rules on us and judged us by a different standard? A student complains that his teacher grades inconsistently. She seems to be arbitrary in assigning values to projects, and often gives no clear word on what she expects. He says she isn’t being fair. A boss shows favoritism among his employers, advancing those who are his friends, while leaving the truly worthy behind. Not fair, we say.

God is not like this. He plays straight. He tells us what He expects, and He shows no partiality in His judgments. “Righteous are You, O Lord,” says the Psalmist, “and Your laws are right,” (Ps. 119:137). Likewise, He demands justice of us: “How blessed are those who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right,” (Ps. 106:3).

Can Be Depended Upon

Finally, God can be counted on. He is faithful to His word and His character. Knowing what He is like teaches us what He does. And one of His characteristics is being always the same: “For I, the Lord, do not change,” He says (Mal. 3:6). He is

the one “who does not change like shifting shadows” (James. 1:17). God is faithful forever to his own nature.

He is also faithful to his decrees and his promises. “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known;” He said. “[T]hen suddenly I acted, and they came to pass,” (Isa. 48:3). He promised Sarah a child in her old age, and He gave her one (Gen. 21:1). King Solomon said, “not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through His servant Moses,” (1 Kings 8:56).

God can be trusted. He tells the truth, He does what is fair, and He can be counted on. This is a God you can believe in.

Notes

1. Joan Osborne, “One of Us,” on the album *Relish*, Uni/Mercury, 1995. Downloaded from http://lyrics.astraweb.com:2000/display.cgi?joan_osborne%2E%2Erelish%2E%2Eone_of_us, Feb. 17, 2001.

2. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 53.

3. Cf. Beaudoin, 74-75.

4. Beaudoin, xiii-xiv.

5. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching The Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 43.

6. See Jerry Solomon, “Generation X“, an overview of this generation.

7. Long, 48, quoting Andrew Smith, “Talking About My Generation,” *The Face*, July 1994, p. 82.

8. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New*

Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 46.

9. Celek and Zander, 51.

10. Celek and Zander, 31-32.

11. Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 273.

12. Coupland, 310, 313, 359.

13. Osborne, *One of Us*.

14. David Hocking, *The Nature of God in Plain Language* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 65.

15. Coupland, 359.

16. Celek and Zander, 55.

17. Hocking, 145. I am indebted to the author for the outline of this section.

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Supernatural Parenting

Sue Bohlin points out that we can be supernatural parents when we are relying on a supernatural God for direction and strength. It is important that we include parenting as an integral part of our Christian worldview. Applying a biblical perspective is crucial to imparting the truth needed for our children to live truly successful lives.

There are certain universal truths in parenting.

• If you hook a dog leash over a ceiling fan, the motor is not strong enough to rotate a 42 pound boy wearing Pound Puppy underwear and a Superman cape. It is strong enough, however, to spread paint on all four walls of a twenty by twenty foot room.

• If you use a waterbed as home plate while wearing baseball shoes it does not leak—it explodes. A king size waterbed holds enough water to fill a 2000 square foot house four inches deep.

• The spin cycle on the washing machine does not make earth worms dizzy. It will, however, make cats dizzy.

• Cats throw up twice their body weight when dizzy.

Dr. Dobson says that parenting isn't for cowards. It ain't such a hot job for mere mortals, either. What a daunting task—being completely responsible for an infant who cannot do a single thing for himself except make a lot of noise and a lot of dirty diapers! Teaching them to walk. And talk. And act like civilized human beings. Even more importantly, their eternal destiny is in our hands, and we have the awesome opportunity to show them what God is like, and to lead them to saving faith in Christ!

Praise God, as believers we're not limited to our own strength and power. Christ died for us, to give His life to us, to live HIS life THROUGH us. We can parent with the same supernatural energy that raised Christ from the dead. We can parent with the same infinite supply of wisdom and patience that Jesus had. We can let Him parent through us—we can be supernatural parents!

The Bible says that Christ is our life. What does that mean when you're about to change your fourteenth diaper today? "Lord Jesus, I don't have the stomach or the strength to do

this, so You change this diaper through me. Here are my hands—use them—here's my face—show love to my baby by smiling through me."

"I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." What does that mean when you've been giving, giving, giving all day and you're on empty? "Lord, I'm empty and weak and out of resources. You be strong in my weakness. I will do this in Your strength because I don't have any left."

"For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." How do we live that out in parenting kids who would rather snarl at us than look at us, who have swallowed the junior-high-culture's dictum that the only good parent is a dead parent? "Lord Jesus, Thank You for giving me this child. I choose to remember she is a gift and not a punishment. I don't have what it takes to be kind today, Lord. You be kind in me. I cannot love this child today, Lord, so You channel Your perfect love through me. I am Your willing vessel but I'm fresh out of unconditional love and acceptance. So You be a loving and wise parent through me."

You can be a supernatural parent. Even without a Superman cape.

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"Why Did God Allow Animals to be Eaten and Sacrificed?"

Why did God allow animals to be sacrificed and to eat other animals if He loves His creation? They are innocent. (I am not

an animal rights activist. I am a Christian.)

I think the answer must first be addressed in the reality with which we find ourselves. The cosmos according to Christians was created by God. In the early chapters of Genesis we find that everything God created is expressed over and over as being something GOOD.

The Cosmos is made up of minerals, plants, animals, and humans, the lower to the higher. We are told that only man was created in God's image. That does not mean the rest of creation is of NO value, but there is a hierarchy involved. We are told that all of the created order was intended for man. And that he was to have dominion over it. This does not mean the exploitation of everything for selfish purposes. But God provided a food chain involving plants and animals for man.

We see in the Hindu culture a good example of what happens to a culture when the food chain is distorted. Hindus, with their doctrine of reincarnation, believe that animals are just as valuable as human beings, and some, in a former life, may have actually been human beings. Therefore, all devout Hindus are vegetarians.

What makes this difficult is that now scientists are moving toward the position that even PLANTS have consciousness! Does God love the flora any less than the fauna He created? That leaves us with a diet for our existence totally dependent upon rocks!

Man was never intended to "rape the resources." Having "dominion" meant for man to be good stewards of the plant and animal world. "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," says the psalmist. (Ps. 24:1) We don't own the earth; we are to be good stewards of it.

The scriptures are filled with indications of God's love for that which He created. Jesus notices the beautiful lilies of the field. Men are not to abuse their animals, but rather care

for them with kindness, not with harshness. He takes notice of every sparrow who falls to the ground in death. God explicitly states that one purpose of plants and animals was to provide food for man. He even gave some instructions about *which* animals we were to eat and which we should not.

Consider this verse: Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not *worth much more than they?* (Matt. 6:27). Jesus goes on to say, "Do not be anxious saying, 'What shall we eat? Or what shall we drink?'…for…your heavenly Father *knows* that you have *need* for all these things." (Matt. 6:31-32).

Your question springs out of a matrix of thought which is very popular in the modern world. . .that all life is sacred (I agree). But the further notion held forth today is that the life of a dolphin or a sea otter or a spotted owl is equal in value to a human being.

The Bible does not teach this equality. Jesus didn't teach it, as we see above. All life is sacred because it came from the hand of God. But it is not all equal in value. Man is set apart as the recipient for which it was intended.

Those who would remove this distinction do not elevate man. If there is nothing special about man (which appears to be true in so many ways), then man is dragged down to the status of beast or animal, and an "open season" on man to cure overpopulation problems would make as much sense as an open season on whitetail deer each fall here in Texas to thin out the one half million which inhabit this state. My point here is that once you remove this line, man is not special in any sense and there is no reason we shouldn't live like the rest of the animals on the planet: "survival of the fittest." Hitler understood this. . .and practiced it!

I don't think you would agree that this is a solution to the

problem.

Does this help any?

Sincerely,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Christian Apologetics

Rick Wade's introduction to Christian apologetics, rather than delving into specific arguments for the faith, examines the need to think well and develop logic skills. It is important to be able to answer the charge of elitism that is often leveled at Christianity today, and this essay concludes with some cogent statements making a case for Christianity.

Introduction

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been called upon to explain why we believe what we believe. The apostle Paul spoke of his ministry as "the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Peter said we need to "be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you."

This activity of the church came to be known as apologetics which means "defense." But, if it is important that we defend the faith, how do we do it?

In this essay I will not provide a lot of evidences and arguments. I will rather look at some basic principles that will guide us in defending the faith. We will talk about our starting point and about the important matter of thinking logically. We'll look at the specific charge of elitism which

is prevalent on college campuses today. Finally, we'll deal with the question of presenting a case for Christianity.

So, what is apologetics, anyway, and what is it supposed to do? Apologetics has been defined as "the science and art of defending the faith." It is chiefly concerned with the question of the truth of Jesus Christ. In the days of the Greeks, when someone was summoned to court to face a charge, he would present an "apology" or a defense. For Christians, this might mean answering the question, "Why do you believe that Jesus is God?" or a question more often heard today, "Why do you think Christians have the truth?"

So, apologetics is first of all defense. It has come to include more than just defense, however. Not only is the truth of our beliefs an issue, but also the beliefs others hold. A second task of apologetics is to challenge other people to defend their beliefs.

A third task of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. One might call this task "proving" Christianity (although the matter of proof must be qualified). If this seems to be too ambitious a goal, we might speak simply of persuading people of the truth of the biblical message.

In all of this our goal is to let the light of God's truth shine in all its brilliance. It is our ambition also to bring unbelievers to a recognition of the truth of Jesus Christ and to persuade them to put their faith in Him.

Apologetics is typically a response to a specific question or challenge, either stated outright or just implied. Paul reasoned with the Jews for whom the cross was a stumbling block, "explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." In the second century, apologists defended not only Christian beliefs but also Christians themselves against such charges as atheism and

cannibalism and being threats to the state. In the Medieval era, more attention was given to the challenges of Judaism and Islam. In the era of the Enlightenment, apologists had to defend Christianity against the narrow confines of scientific rationalism. Today the challenge has shifted again, this time from attacks on specific doctrines to the question of whether Christianity has any claim to final truth at all.

Like our forebears, we must answer the challenges of our day. We must respond to our contemporaries' questions as difficult and uncomfortable as that might be.

Thinking Well

One of my frustrations in studying apologetics has been trying to master the overwhelming number of questions and challenges, on the one hand, and supporting evidences and reasons, on the other. Although it behooves us all to master some of these, it seems to me that it is just as important to learn how to think well.

Learning to think well, or logically, is important for Christians for several reasons. It helps us put together the various pieces of our faith to form a cohesive whole. It helps us make decisions in everyday life when the Bible doesn't speak directly to a particular issue. We must learn to deduce true beliefs or proper courses of action from what we do know from Scripture.

Good, logical thinking is especially important for an apologist. On the one hand, it can help prevent us from putting together shoddy arguments for what we believe. On the other hand, it helps us evaluate the beliefs of those who challenge Christianity. Too often we stumble at criticisms which sound good, but which really stand on logically shaky legs. Let's consider a few examples.

Here's a basic one. How do you respond to someone who says,

“There’s no such thing as absolute truth”? If the individual really thinks there is no absolute truth that is, truth that stands for all people at all times, that person at best can only say “In my opinion, there’s no such thing as absolute truth.” To say “There’s no such thing as absolute truth” is to state an absolute; the statement refutes itself.

Here’s another one. You’ve heard people say, “All religions really teach the same thing.” Oh, really? Ours teaches that Jesus is God in flesh; other religions say that He isn’t. A logical principle called the law of non-contradiction says that Jesus can’t both be God and not be God.

Let’s try one more. Some people say, “I can’t believe in Christ. Look at all the terrible things Christians have done through the centuries.” How would you answer this objection? While it is true that what Christians do influences non-Christians’ responses to the gospel, such actions have nothing to do with whether Christianity itself is true. If part of the gospel message was that once a person becomes a Christian that person absolutely will never sin again, the objector would have grounds for questioning the truth of the faith. But the Bible doesn’t say that. We can agree that Christians shouldn’t do terrible things to other people, but what people did in fourteenth-century Europe or do in twentieth-century America in the name of Jesus can’t change the reality of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The person making this argument may not like what Christians have done, but this complaint has no logical force against the truth of Christ. When people present arguments against the faith, we need to discern whether what they say is both factually true and logically sound. Often the objections we hear are neither. Learning how to think logically ourselves will enable us to spot fallacies in others’ thinking. Perhaps pointing these out (in a gentle way, if possible) will cause the person to rethink his or her position. At least it will defuse the attack on our faith.

Answering The Charge of Elitism

I've been talking about the importance of logical thinking in doing apologetics. Now I'd like to apply that in considering a charge currently being made against Christians, especially on college campuses.

In a video I recently saw, a young woman said the notion that Christians have the only truth is "elitist." She was saying that since there are so many different beliefs in the world, how can any one group of people claim to have the only truth? She, and many others like her, consider such thinking arrogant.

How can we respond to this charge? First, notice the name-calling. We are charged with "elitism." The real issue is passed over in favor of a put-down. This is just another example of how ideas and issues are dealt with in our society these days. It is important, however, not to react in kind. Too often in our society the battles over issues and ideas are fought with name-calling and sloganeering. This is unbecoming to Christians and unprofitable in apologetics and evangelism. We need to deal with the ideas themselves.

Second, Christians can acknowledge that non-Christians can know truth and that other religions can include some truth. If they didn't, they would find very few adherents. They fail, though, on such fundamental issues as the identity of Jesus and the way to be reconciled to God.

Third, notice the faulty logic in the argument. What does the reality of many points of view have to do with the truth-value of any of them? This is like saying: "Some men think they should treat their wives with the same respect they desire; some ignore their wives; others think it's okay to beat them. Who's to say only one way can be right?" The structure of the argument is the same, but it is obvious that the conclusion is wrong. A critic might understandably question our assurance

that what we believe is the final truth given that there are so many people who disagree. But it is faulty logic to conclude that no beliefs can claim final truth simply because there are so many of them. Fourth, since the criticism rests upon the idea that two or more conflicting beliefs can be true, we must challenge this assumption. It can be shown to be incorrect by looking to everyday experience. If my wife says it is raining outside but my son says it isn't, do I take my umbrella or not? It can't be both raining and not raining at the same time. Likewise, if one person says Jesus is the only way to salvation and another says He isn't, no more than one of them can be correct.

Some people, of course, will challenge the notion that our knowledge of God is like knowing whether it is raining outside. God is not a part of nature; He is "wholly other."This issue is much too involved to develop here. But I believe that this thinking is fundamentally a prejudice against authoritative revelation. God has spoken, and He has given us evidence in this world to confirm what He has said.

This challenge to Christianity and many others like it are not easy to deal with. But if defending the faith means responding to the challenges of our day, we must prepare ourselves, as difficult as it may be. Otherwise, we can't expect to be heard.

The Case for Christianity Part 1

Earlier I wrote that one of the tasks of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. Now I'd like to present a few foundational considerations, and after that we'll look at how we might construct a case.

When Christians are called upon to present a case for the faith, they are, in effect, being asked to offer proof that Christianity is true. What evidences or arguments can be marshaled to establish the truth of what we believe?

What we would like to do is make a case which no person of reasonable intelligence can fail to accept. But the Bible acknowledges the reality that many people will not believe no matter how compelling the evidence. Remember the story in Luke 16 about the rich man who died and suffered torment? He begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers about what they also faced. Listen to the response. Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.” A determined will can ignore the best of evidence.

Unless we are talking about proof in the mathematical sense, we need to note that proof is person-relative; what will convince one person might not convince another. This doesn’t mean, however, that Christianity only becomes true when someone is convinced. It’s true whether anyone believes it or not.

In making a case for the faith we seek to present a sound argument which will be persuasive for a particular listener. On the one hand, this consideration frees us from the responsibility of having an argument which will convince everyone; on the other hand, it means that we must not depend upon “one-size-fits-all” arguments.

Even if we’re able to deal adequately with the challenges of a given individual, we need to also note what the real basis of our belief is. A true knowledge of God is based upon divine testimony which is accepted by faith, but which is also confirmed for us by evidences of various types. The testimony of Scripture about such matters as the work of Christ on the cross and justification by faith are things which can’t be proved; they are accepted by faith.

We must also remember the nature of our message. Christianity is not just a system of beliefs, but rather the message of the One who is truth. This is an especially pertinent point today, given the mentality of the younger generations. Today we’ve

lost the confidence in our ability to reason through the major issues of life in a disinterested, scientific manner and come to firm conclusions. Conceptual schemes that don't touch us where we really live hold little interest anymore. We need to draw people to Jesus who is the answer to the major questions of life. Christianity is living truth, and it should be preached and defended as such.

We might only be able to convince the non-believer that Christianity is plausible or believable. But that's a good start; often it takes many steps for a person to come to faith. Our job is to provide a solid intellectual foundation to make those steps sure.

The Case for Christianity Part 2

Now we'll finish our discussion by outlining a way of presenting a case for Christianity. Note that this is just an outline; it'll be up to you to fill in the details.

Since God created the universe and is active in His creation, there is no lack of evidence for the truth of Christianity. When I use the word "evidence," I'm using it in a broad way to include not only factual evidence, but logical arguments and human experience as well. Evidence is anything that can be brought to bear on the truth-claims of Scripture.

As we present evidence, we must be aware that the false presuppositions unbelievers hold about God, man, and the world might skew their evaluation of the evidences. In fact, the idea of encouraging people to evaluate Christianity makes some people uneasy. Are we allowing sinful people to bring God to the bar of judgment? No, we aren't. We are simply recognizing that, although the Bible never hints that anyone is justified in rejecting its message, it does present witnesses to the truth, typically through historical reminders and miracles. Further, because unbelievers are made in God's image and live in God's world, they have some understanding of the truth, and

we can appeal to that understanding.

We can divide the kinds of evidence at our disposal into three categories: fact (or empirical evidence); reason (or logical thinking); and experience (or human nature and the experience of life).

These three kinds of evidence can be used two ways: evaluation and explanation.

First, we can look for evidence in a given area which confirms Scripture. This is the evaluation aspect of apologetics. So, for example, we can ask, Are there observable facts which affirm what Scripture teaches? Consider history and archeology. Are the teachings of Scripture coherent and logically consistent? Yes, they are. Typically, people who say there are contradictions in the Bible have a hard time remembering one. Is what the Bible says about human nature and human experience true to what we know? Yes it is; we can identify with biblical characters.

The second way we use evidences is to see if Christianity can explain them. The following questions might clarify what I mean. We can ask, Does the Christian worldview explain the facts of nature? Yes, it does, for it says that Jesus created and sustains the universe. Does Christianity provide an explanation for the reliability of human reason itself? Sure; we are created in the image of God with intelligence. Does the Bible explain human nature and experience? Yes, for it relates that, while the image of God and common grace enable us to do good to a certain extent, we are given to sin because of the Fall.

In this essay I've tried to provide some foundational principles for defending the faith. As we prepare to give an answer to our society, it's important that we learn to think logically, that we respond to the questions of our day, that we become familiar with the broad range of evidence at our

disposal, and that we consider the person or persons we are addressing as we present our case. With this in mind, we exhibit the truth of Jesus Christ in all its splendor, and, as always, leave the results to God.

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Jesus' Claims to be God – Yes, Jesus Said He is God

Sue Bohlin answers the question about Jesus claims to be God by reviewing the major scripture passages where Jesus did so. This study clearly shows that Jesus was God and openly claimed to be so. Bottom line: Jesus clearly communicated that He and the Father are one and are God.

[Note: The following essay was written in response to a friend's request: "Can you tell me where in the Bible Jesus claimed to be God?"]

This article is not an exhaustive list of Christ's claims to be God, but it does cover the major ones. I suggest you read this with a Bible open, as I have not posted all the scriptures listed.

1. Mark 2:1-12—Jesus heals a paralytic. He had authority to forgive sins, which is something only God Himself can do. Then, to authenticate His claim, He demonstrated His power by healing the paralytic.

2. The miracles Jesus performed are a very strong indication of His divinity (because no mere human can work actual miracles by his own power). Jesus referred to the miracles in John 10:24-39 as proof that he was telling the truth. This

passage is Christ's own response to the unbelieving Jews' charge of blasphemy (dishonoring God by claiming to be God). Incidentally, this section also includes a beautiful promise that once you are saved/born again/become a Christian, you can never lose your salvation. Verses 28-29 say we will "never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (Here is another strong statement that He is God.) We can have the assurance of eternal security because we didn't earn salvation in the first place; it is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8,9).

3. During Christ's trial, the chief priests asked Him point blank, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." And He said,

- "I am." (Mark 14:60-62)
- "Yes, it is as you say." (Matthew 26: 63-65)
- "You are right in saying I am." (Luke 22:67-70)

These are all ways of saying the same thing, written by different authors.

In John's gospel, he recounts Jesus' interview with Pontius Pilate (John 18:33-37). Pilate wanted to know if He were the King of the Jews. Jesus then talked about how His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate said, "You *are* a king, then!" Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king…" The truth is, he is King of the whole universe.

4. Jesus says in John 10:11-18 that he is the Good Shepherd. When you read this passage along with Ezekiel 34:1-16, you can see that Jesus was identifying Himself with God, who pronounced Himself Shepherd over Israel. The Jewish people, being an agrarian and shepherding society, knew and dearly loved this section of the Old Testament because God was using a metaphor they *lived* every day. So when Jesus said, "**I** am the Good Shepherd," and that whole John passage so clearly

parallels the Ezekiel passage, there was no doubt that He was claiming to be God.

5. John 4:25-26. This is where the Samaritan woman, whom Jesus went to meet at the well, gets into a discussion of "living water" with Jesus. He pinpoints her sinful lifestyle (knowledge He would not have had as a mere human passerby), then He admits that He is the long-awaited Messiah: "I who speak to you am He."

6. John 5:1-18. Jesus heals a lame man on the Sabbath, which the unbelieving Jews gave Him a hard time about. His answer was, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working." It was a well-known Jewish line of thought that, although God rested on the seventh day after Creation week, He continued to "work" in being loving, compassionate, and just, as well as keeping the earth producing, keeping the sun moving, etc. In other words, although the creating had stopped, the maintenance went on—even on the Sabbath, and that was the only "work" allowed on that day. So Jesus is putting Himself on the same level as his Father in working on the Sabbath. And by calling God "My Father" (instead of "Our Father"), He was claiming an intimate relationship with God that far exceeded anyone else's. So in these two ways, He was making Himself equal with God.

7. John 16:28. "I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." What Christ is saying here is that He existed along with the Father before being born. He "entered the world" by wrapping Himself in human flesh and being born as a baby. He grew up, fulfilled His mission/ministry, was crucified and raised from the dead (all part of the "mission") and then left the world to go back to the Father in heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of God (the place of honor). He is the only person who **ever** existed before conception. That Christ was in a "pre-incarnate state" means that He is God.

8. (This is many people's favorite argument for the deity of Christ, including mine.)

First, turn to Exodus 3, where Moses encounters God in the burning bush. God tells Moses that he is the one He has chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses says to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God replies to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God has said that His own name, His personal name, is "I AM."

Now…

a) Turn to John 8:56-58. Jesus is talking to the unbelieving Jews. "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad." "You are not yet 50 years old," they said to Him, "and *you* have seen Abraham?" "I tell you the truth," Jesus announced, "before Abraham was, I AM!" Jesus was the great I AM from before the beginning of time; He existed before Abraham ever was. He is claiming here to be the I AM of the Old Testament. Verse 59 says the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but the Lord Jesus slipped away. The reason they wanted to stone Him was because stoning was the death penalty for blasphemy. He was claiming to be Yahweh—Jehovah—Almighty God—I AM. (Of course, it wasn't blasphemy when Christ claimed to be who He truly was!)

b) John 8:24. "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I AM, you will indeed die in your sins." In your Bible, it may read "if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be…." The extra words are supplied by the editors; they're not in the original text. If you're familiar with Exodus 3 you don't need the extra words for it to make grammatical sense. The Lord Jesus is again claiming to be God.

c) John 18:4. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas and some priests and soldiers are about to take Jesus prisoner. “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to Him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it that you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I AM,’ Jesus said. When He said, ‘I AM,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” (Again, in your Bible the editors may have supplied “I am [he]” to make it grammatically correct. The Greek just says, “I AM.”)

The force of Jesus’ claim to be Yahweh (I AM) was so powerful that it literally knocked the arresting officers and the Jewish priests off their feet!

The above points are by no means exhaustive, and are given to contribute to the reader’s understanding that Jesus Christ is Lord because He is God. In this vein, I would like to close with one of the most powerful quotes ever written on the subject, by noted author C.S. Lewis in his classic, *Mere Christianity*:

> I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come away with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

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The Theology of Christmas Carols – A Godly View of This Sacred Holiday

Dr. Robert Pyne looks at the theological message found in five different popular Christmas carols. For the most part, these carols, when listened to for their content, help us remember a biblical worldview perspective of this popular holiday.

Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Most radio stations play some type of Christmas music during the holiday season, but many of the songs have become so familiar to us that we no longer consider their content. In between the secular songs like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Up on a Housetop," you may hear the strains of an old hymn by Charles Wesley called "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus." It was written in 1744, and it reads,

> **Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;**
> **from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in Thee.**
> **Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art;**
> **dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.**
> **Born Thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a King,**
> **born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring.**
> **By Thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;**
> **by Thine own sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious throne.**

"Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is a little heavier than most of the music we are used to hearing today, and if we are not

careful we will miss much of the meaning. The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled Israel's longing for the Messiah. As the one whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the "long-expected Jesus."

A few of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled are Isaiah 7:14, which spoke of a virgin giving birth to a child whose name would mean "God with us;" Isaiah 9:6, which told of a child whose name would be called "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, eternal Father, the Prince of Peace;" and Micah 5:2, which said that from Bethlehem would come a ruler whose "goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

These and many similar prophecies looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and many devout Jews prayed earnestly for the day when He would arrive. Luke 2 tells of Simeon, a man of faith who was "looking for the consolation of Israel" (v. 25). When he saw Jesus as an infant, Simeon knew that this Child was the fulfillment of his messianic hope. Charles Wesley was borrowing from this passage when he described Jesus in this song as "Israel's strength and consolation."

Although He fulfilled Israel's prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the "hope of all the earth" and the "dear desire of every nation." More than that, He is the "joy of every longing heart." He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul.

The second verse tells us why Jesus can meet our expectations: He was "born a child and yet a King." As the One who is both God and man, Jesus was able to satisfy God's wrath completely by dying on the cross for our sins. When Wesley wrote about Jesus' "all sufficient merit," he was referring to Christ's ability to bring us to salvation.

"Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is a great song for Christmas,

focusing on the “long-expected Jesus” who was born to set us free from sin and to bring us salvation by His death.

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley’s best-known song is probably “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.” It has been altered slightly by editors, but most of it remains just as Wesley intended when he wrote it over 250 years ago.

As we generally hear it today, the song begins with a triumphant proclamation of Jesus’ birth, describes the fact that He is both God and man, and then praises Him for the salvation He was born to provide.

The first verse reads, in part,

> **Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King;**
> **Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”**

Talking about peace on earth is popular at Christmas time, and appropriately so, for Jesus did come to bring peace. Primarily, however, He came to bring us peace with God, which is what Wesley meant when he wrote, “God and sinners reconciled.” We have all sinned against God; we have broken His commandments and thus made ourselves His enemies. When people become enemies, they cannot go back to being friends until their differences are set aside. Sometimes reconciliation involves the payment of reparations, and which is essentially what Jesus did when He died on the cross. He paid the price necessary to reconcile us to God. The price was really ours to pay, not God’s, but Jesus was able to pay it because, though He was God, He became also a man, being born as a baby on that first Christmas day.

Charles Wesley described Jesus’ birth in the second verse of this song. He wrote,

> **Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.**
> **Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,**
> **Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.**

Though He was the everlasting Lord, the second person of the Trinity (which is described in the song as "the Godhead"), fully equal in nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus became the "offspring of the Virgin's womb." He was "veiled in flesh," the "incarnate Deity." He was God, having become also a man. The name Emmanuel means "God with us," which is what Wesley was referring to when he wrote that Jesus was "pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." He became a man, but in the process did not lose His deity. He was "God with us."

The idea that Jesus would lay aside His divine privileges for any reason is nothing short of incredible, but He did so in order to provide us with salvation. Wesley focused on this amazing occurrence in the third verse, where he wrote,

> **Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,**
> **Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.**

Jesus laid aside His own rights, coming to this earth and dying for our sins, that those who trust in Him might have eternal life. He was born that we might be born again, and that is good reason to sing "glory to the newborn King."

O Little Town of Bethlehem

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written in 1867 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia. He had been in Israel two years earlier and had celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. This song describes the city not so much as it was when Brooks observed it, but as he thought it might have appeared on the night of Jesus' birth.

The first verse reads,

> **O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!**
> **Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.**
> **Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;**
> **The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**

The streets of our own cities are quiet on Christmas day; stores are closed and most people are at home. It is possible that Bethlehem was quiet on the night that Jesus was born, but we know that the place was full of people from out of town, and chances are that there were even more people on the streets than usual. But this song does not say as much about the level of activity in Bethlehem as it does about the fact that very few people even noticed the Baby who was born. One line from the second verse reads, "While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love"—a situation that is true even today. The world goes on about its business, working, eating, sleeping, and playing, utterly oblivious to the spiritual realities around it. As Brooks wrote in the third verse of the song,

> **How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!**
> **So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.**
> **No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,**
> **Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.**

When Christ came into this world, He came quietly. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was the only publicity that accompanied Him. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough; He did not arrive with the pomp that one would expect of a King. For the most part, He still does not. When people today place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that He comes to live inside them through the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23; Rom. 8:9-11). There is not a lot of flash associated with an entrance like that, and some of your

friends might not even notice the difference at first, but when you trust in Jesus Christ an incredibly significant event takes place. Your sins are forgiven and you are made a new person (John 5:24; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus' coming means that Christmas does not have to be the lonely time that it is for so many people. We can experience His salvation and enjoy His presence as individuals, even though the world around us does not understand what is really going on. As the last verse of the song reads,

> **O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray,**
> **Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.**
> **We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;**
> **O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.**

O Holy Night

The carol "O Holy Night" by John Dwight begins by describing the night Jesus was born. It reads,

> **O holy night! The stars are brightly shining.**
> **It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.**
> **Long lay the world in sin and error pining,**
> **Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.**

The coming of Jesus Christ should make us feel valuable, and it should make us feel loved. John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came because "God so loved the world." First Peter 1 reminds us that God has actually purchased us out of our slavery to sin, not with something perishable and comparatively worthless like silver and gold, "but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (vv. 18,19). The fact that Jesus gave Himself for us should cause our souls to feel their worth to God.

The second verse of "O Holy Night" calls us to consider the incredible fact that the King of kings was born as a human

infant and placed in a manger. Most of us cannot relate to that kind of birth—our children are usually born in hospitals and nurtured in the most sterile of environments. Jesus was not. He was born in a stable. More than that, He lived a life of poverty, experienced severe temptation and persecution, and died a brutal death, abandoned by His friends and wrongly condemned by His enemies. Thus, although we cannot always relate to His experiences, He can relate to ours. This empathy is what Dwight was describing when he wrote,

> **The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,**
> **In all our trials born to be our Friend.**
> **He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger.**
> **Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.**

It must have seemed ironic for grown men to bow down before a baby, but no act of worship was ever more appropriate.

Considering our Lord's birth should cause us to worship Him, and it should cause us to respond to one another with humility. The third verse of "O Holy Night" reads,

> **Truly He taught us to love one another;**
> **His law is love and His gospel is peace.**
> **Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,**
> **And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

We no longer have slavery in this country, but we have many other forms of oppression, and Dwight was correct in writing that the oppression of human beings is inconsistent with the worship of Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are to model the humility that Jesus demonstrated when He voluntarily laid aside His rights as God and became also a man in order to suffer for our salvation. Based on Christ's example, Paul writes,

> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more

> important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Paul tells us that we are wrong when we put our own interests ahead of someone else's, whether through the slavery that John Dwight spoke against or simply through insensitivity toward others.Because He loved us, Jesus chose not to exercise all of His rights. May we follow that pattern of humility as we love one another, even after Christmas.

Joy to the World

"Joy to the World" was written by Isaac Watts and published for the first time in 1719. The song is a paraphrase of the 98th Psalm, and it has become one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time. The popularity of "Joy to the World" has resulted in a number of revisions designed to fit the theology of those singing it. For example, in 1838 the song was revised by a group of religious skeptics, who apparently liked the song but did not want to sing about the coming of the Lord. They changed the words from

> **"Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.**
> **Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing,"**

to

> "Joy to the world! The light has come [a reference to reason], the only lawful King. Let every heart prepare it room, and moral nature sing."

Several years ago the song was used by a marching choir in a major televised parade. But the choir only sang the first four words, "Joy to the world," and then just hummed the rest of the song!

People who do not believe in Jesus often do not mind singing about a baby born in a manger, but it is a little more awkward for them to sing about Him being the Lord of heaven and earth. And this song makes it very clear that Jesus did not just come to be an inspiring infant or a gentle teacher. He came as the Lord, the King of kings, fully deserving our praise.

"Joy to the World" continues with the words,

> **No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.**
> **He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.**

This verse alludes to Genesis 3, where God told the first man that the ground itself would be cursed as a consequence of his sin. Instead of abundant crops, the ground would now produce thorns and thistles—weeds that would cause humankind to labor intensively in order to survive. With this verse of the song, Watts anticipates the day when the blessings of salvation in Christ will overturn sin's consequences "as far as the curse is found."

That day has not come yet, but someday Christ will return to reign in His glory and judge the nations. As the last verse of "Joy to the World" reads,

> **He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove**
> **The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.**

When Jesus came to this earth, He did not remain in the manger, where He might have been easily controlled. He did not even remain on the cross, where He might have been honored as a martyr. He rose from the dead, that He might reign over all creation. Whether people enjoy singing the words or not, Isaac Watts was right. "Joy to the world! The Lord is come."

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