

The Scandal of Blood Atonement: “Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?”

The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection raises accusations that Christianity is obsessed with blood. Many believers struggle with this too. Byron Barlowe explores the biblical reasons for the focus on Christ’s blood and why its shedding was necessary.

The Bloody Cross: A Tough Thing to Handle

Easter season is all about the death and resurrection of Christ—which centers on the blood sacrifice He endured. Christianity is called a bloody religion, focusing on the execution of Jesus Christ on a cross. Why is this true and what does it mean when we say His blood atones for our sin?



Millions of Americans—and billions of Christians around the world—celebrated the death and Resurrection of Christ during Passion Week and Easter Sunday. The topic was everywhere from sermons to a CNN docudrama titled *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery*.

You may have questions about all the talk of “the blood of Christ” and songs saying things like “Jesus’s blood washed away my sins.” This bloody theme does raise understandable concerns that are shared by believers, seekers and skeptics alike.

In fact, more and more skeptics are posting on the Internet things like this book promotion:

“Christians are obsessed with blood! They sing about it, declare they are washed in it and even drink it! In this

book you will discover the crazy background to this Christian obsession and the truth about the bloodthirsty God they claim to know and serve.”[{1}](#)

In this article, we’ll discuss whether these charges are true and fair and explain the doctrine of blood atonement.

Again, even many Christians—including me—have wondered deeply about all the biblical imagery of shed blood, what some call the Crimson Thread of Scripture. I mean the grotesqueness of Old Testament animal sacrifice and the belief in Jesus’s torturous slaying as the core of salvation. Radical stuff for modern ears.

So what is blood atonement and why does it matter? In historic orthodox Christian thought, God’s Son is at the very center of history doing these things:

- reconciling man to God,
- ransoming humans from slavery to sin and well-deserved death and
- justly recompensing God for the horrific offense of rebellion and disobedience to Him.

Thankfully, the gospel (or good news) is simple. The Bible claims, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”[{2}](#)

The bottom line for all people is this: out of Christ’s death came the hope of eternal life—and His resurrection proved this. Our sin caused God’s Son to suffer and die. By grace, through faith, we can benefit. Otherwise, we suffer eternally for staying with the cosmic rebellion that started in a perfect Garden long ago.

Yet, this blood-centered good news is a scandal to both those who believe and those who deny it. In fact, the Greek root

word *skandalon* is used for Christ Himself.^{3} You see, Jews denied Christ as the Promised One and Gentiles thought it was all nonsense. Nothing has changed for mankind: the choices are either do-it-yourself religion, being too smart for all that, or believing in this radical hope.

The Reason Someone Had to Die

Why did anybody have to die? God's justice and holiness demands a death penalty for the sinner.

We are all in a serious spiritual and moral pickle. Biblical Christianity declares that each person ever born is stuck under an irreversible "*sin*drome" for which there is no human answer. History sadly records the habitual and continual effects of sin: oppression, addictions, self-promoting power plays, deceit, war, on and on.

Now for a reality check: no moral order, either in a family, a company, military unit or society survives ambiguity or failure to enforce laws. Just ask the victims of unpunished criminals set loose to perpetrate again. If the Creator were to simply wink at sin or let people off scot-free, where would justice be? What kind of God would He be?

God is holy and He called Himself the Truth. There is no way God would be true to Himself and the moral order He created and yet fail to punish sin. Such impunity would mock justice. As one theologian puts it, "Pardon without atonement nullifies justice . . . A law without penalty is morally unserious, even dangerous."

Ok, but penalties have levels of harshness. Why is death necessary? Scripture spells out clearly the decree that sinners must die. In God's original command He stated, "When you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). In Ezekiel the same formula appears slightly reworded: "The soul who sins is the one who

will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Paul boiled it down this way: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s justice and holiness demand death for sin. Blood must be shed. Detractors of the cross tend to underestimate sin and know nothing of its offense to a holy God. Everyone wants justice—for others.

Ok, so what does a just and holy God do with impure, treasonous creatures He made to bear His image? God was in a quandary, if you will.

Yet, even in the Garden, He was already hinting at a plan to reconcile this dilemma. “God so loved the world” that he sent down His own Son as a man to pay the death penalty.[{4}](#)

Thomas Oden writes, “God’s holiness made a penalty for sin necessary . . . Love was the divine motive; holiness [was] the divine requirement. [Romans 5:8 reads] ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. [And as Romans 8 teaches,] This love was so great that God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32).”[{5}](#)

Christ’s Death and Resurrection Was Unlike Other Religious Stories: It Was All for Love

God’s morally just demand for a death-payment is not the same as pagan gods, who maliciously demanded sacrifices. True for one big reason:

Isn’t this crucifixion thing simply about a grouchy god acting all bloodthirsty, as some atheists like popular author Richard Dawkins say? Should good people find this repugnant? One unbelieving critic wrote,

“Unfortunately, much of Christian art consists of depicting

the sufferings and agony of Jesus on the Cross. This reflects the obsession of Christianity with the Crucifixion "Crosstianity" [in the contemptuous words of one skeptic]. The obsession with 'our sins' having been 'washed away by the Blood of the Lamb' would be regarded as evidence of a serious mental illness . . . but when this is an obsession of millions of people it becomes 'religious faith'." {6}

Wow! Did you know that you, if you are a believer, are part of an insane global crowd? This vividly illustrates the scandal of the cross: "which is to them that are perishing foolishness" as the Apostle Paul described it. {7}

No, biblical sacrifice is not a bloodfest, but the way to deal with a sad reality. Put it this way: If God said, "Nah, don't worry about rebelling against your Creator," would that be a just and righteous God? Would a deity who fails to punish wrongdoing be worth following? Would His laws mean anything? Yet, we are unable to keep laws, so He steps in to pay that penalty. With His lifeblood. This storyline is utterly unique in the long human history of religions. And the resurrection Christians celebrate shows its truth in actual time and on this dirty earth.

Pagan myths of savior gods who rise from the dead have only a surface resemblance to the biblical resurrection. Such deities are more like impetuous and tyrannical people than the one and only Yahweh. The biblical God's love fostered the unthinkable: set up a sacrificial system for a one-of-a-kind people—the Israelites—that served as a foretelling of His *coup de grace*: dying in man's place as the spotless sacrificial Lamb. What a novel religious idea that only the true God could dream up! Theologian Thomas Oden says it this way: "It was God who was both offering reconciliation and receiving the reconciled." {8}

God's merging of perfect holiness, just retributive punishment and allowance of His Son's execution was actually a beautiful

thing. Francis of Assisi wrote that “love and faithfulness meet together [at the cross]; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.”[{9}](#)

But Why a Violent, Bloody Death?

I get that death was demanded of someone to pay for sin. So why a bloody suffering and execution? Why the constant shedding of blood?

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie theaters in 2004 to mixed reviews. It earned its R-rating for gory bloodshed and, ironically, became a cultural scandal itself. Seems that the bloody realism was too much for both soft-core Christians and high-minded unbelievers. But this vividly poignant portrayal of Christ's blood-stained Passion did raise a good question.

When it came to saving mankind, why the shedding of blood? Could God not have found another way? Church Father Athanasius believed that, if there were a better way to preserve human free will and still reconcile rebellious man to a holy God, He would have used it. Apparently, Christ's suffering and death was the only solution.

The Apostle Paul summarized Christ's entire earthly ministry this way: He “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). At the cross, “human hate did all the damage it could do to the only Son of God.”[{10}](#) God used the realities available to Him, including the masterfully grim method of crucifixion, honed to a fine art by Roman pagans who viewed human life as dispensable.

Again, why is death demanded of God to atone for sin? The grounding for such a claim appears early in the Bible, after the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In Genesis 9 Yahweh declares, “I will require a reckoning . . . for the life of

man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.”[{11}](#) Apparently, God has put the price of a man’s life as that of another’s life.

The highlight of Christ’s death was its substitutionary sense. The Apostle Peter wrote, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”[{12}](#) Justice, fairness, reality itself demanded a bloodguilt payment for sin. Christ paid it.

Substitutionary sacrifice was nothing new for the Jews who unwittingly had the Messiah crucified. From the beginning of God’s dealings with His people, agreements were blood covenants. What else could carry the weight of such momentous things? And, as the book of Hebrews teaches, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.**”[{13}](#)

One theologian plainly said, “Through this sacrificial system, the people of Israel were being prepared for the incomparable act of sacrifice that was to come in Jesus Christ.”[{14}](#)

His suffering, death and resurrection conquered sin and neutered the fear of death. Only blood could clean sin; only God’s Son’s blood could do it perfectly and forever.

Here’s the scandal we spoke of: only a perfect sacrifice would do for washing mankind’s sins away and reconciling us back to God.

Beautiful Obsession: God Was Glad to Allow This Brutality for Us!

God said it was His pleasure to pay the death penalty with His own self, in the Person of His son. Christianity’s so-called blood-obsession is a beautiful picture of perfect divine love.

Theologian Thomas Oden summarized well our discussion of

Christ's blood atonement. He wrote, "Love was the divine motive; holiness the divine requirement. 'God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8)."

Such claims trump the understandable disgust of doubters. But the red blood leads to clean white.

Chick-fil-A restaurant employees are trained to say, "My pleasure" when serving customers. Imagine God saying that to believers regarding the cross of Christ! Paul explains in his letter to the Colossian church that "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness of deity to dwell in Him . . . having made peace *through the blood* of His cross . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death . . ."[\[15\]](#)

God was glad to stand in as the essential scapegoat to restore us to right relations with Himself, to buy us back from slavery to sin, fear and death, and to abolish sin and its effects. This doesn't sound like a bloodthirsty tyrannical deity demanding a whipping boy or abusing his own child, as some acidly accuse. "My pleasure" brings in new dimensions of lovingkindness and servant-heartedness.

But wait, there's more! Scripture lists lots of wonderful effects created by the blood of Christ. These include forgiveness, propitiation or satisfaction of God's righteous wrath, justification or being made right, reconciliation with God, cleansing, sanctification, freedom from sin, and the conquest of Satan.

Yes, you could say that Christianity is blood-obsessed. As accused, even its hymns often focus on the benefits bought at the highest of prices: the life of the God-Man Himself. One famous hymn goes:

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This beautiful blood obsession finds its highest hope in Revelation. The following is a prophecy about persecuted believers:

“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”[\[16\]](#)

Maybe the revelations here are as crazy as skeptics say. The foolishness of God. We believe they are the most glorious story ever told.

Notes

1. Promotion at Amazon.com for *Obsessed with Blood: The Crazy Things Christians Believe*, Book 1, by Ex-Preacher.
2. 1 Peter 3:18, NASB.
3. Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 1 Peter 2:8.
4. John 3:16.
5. Oden, Thomas, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 405.
6. Meyer, Peter, “Why I Am Not a Christian”. Serendipity blog. Accessed 2-27-17, www.serendipity.li/eden/why_i_am_not_a_christian.htm.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:18.
8. Ibid., 414.
9. Ibid., 405.
10. Ibid., 389.
11. Genesis 9:4-6.
12. 1 Peter 3:18.
13. Hebrews 9:22-23, emphasis mine.
14. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 413-414.

15. Colossians 1:19.

16. Revelation 7:14b-17, emphasis mine.

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How to Kill Sin: John Owen's The Mortification of Sin

Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen's classic book The Mortification of Sin.

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an ongoing battle with sin. He suggested I read John Owen's book, *The Mortification of Sin*[\[1\]](#). I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen's key insights in the battle against sin.



Let's begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, "mort-" or "mors" means death. *Mortificare*—to kill.[\[2\]](#) Other examples of this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists "shame" and "humiliation" as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill *sin*. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It's only appropriate

if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don't sit here and read another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you're reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and you're ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you're still reading, then let's press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.

What is Mortification?

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill. . .sin. That's what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That's why this is a big deal. That's why this matters.

That's also why sin's presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that "[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death."[{3}](#)

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before.[{4}](#) So until then we mortify sin.[{5}](#)

Now let's talk about mortification. Let's talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen's instruction is clear: "utterly destroy it" or, make it cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.[{6}](#)

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires," as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn't merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus' strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let's talk about how not to mortify sin.

How NOT to Mortify Sin

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death.[\[7\]](#)

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.

Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you're tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For

example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year's resolution. You can force the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you've resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it's merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

How to Mortify Sin

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don't it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here's the bad news, though. *You* can't mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don't despair! This doesn't mean you can't experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God's will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something *you* do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh. Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen's words. "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet."[\[8\]](#)

The way to mortify sin is to set *faith* at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. His sacrifice is your remedy. That's how you kill sin—you don't. You believe in the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It's freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don't. Owen goes on to add two more points of substance. First "fill your soul" with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.

The second point is to *expect* relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ's blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect it's going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who's been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It's a slow and difficult, often *painful* process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don't. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

Conclusion

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don't it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death. Owen's book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the "soul and substance of all false religion in

the world.”{9}

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you’re trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

“Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin.”{10} You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus’ promise in that struggle: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”{11}

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.{12} He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

Notes

1. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House), 1996.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000.
3. James 1:15.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.
5. Colossians 3:5.

6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
8. Owen, p.161.
9. Ibid., p.23.
10. Ibid., p.161.
11. John 16:33.
12. Psalm 139:14.

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“God Forbids Fornication, But Webster’s Definition Is Limited. Other Sex Okay Then?”

[Editor’s Note: Probe received a lengthy, technical question regarding this topic which quoted the Merriam Webster online dictionary (www.m-w.com). The definitions of the [related terms](#) were unnecessarily graphic, but the gist of the question was this:]

Having read your Q & A section regarding sexuality and your article [How Far Is Too Far?](#), I would appreciate your valued opinion in my response to this article. What is the boundary of illicit (premarital) sexual activity? Does it include orgasms without direct interaction of the couple’s sexual organs, which is basically the dictionary definition of intercourse? Can one engage in sexually pleasurable activities without crossing the line to fornication?

Thanks for the question. Well, the explanation you gave is

certainly creative. You obviously spent plenty of time deliberating your argument and giving an inductive explanation. But I do notice some moral gaps that need to be addressed.

First, Merriam-Webster's dictionary is not a repository of God's holy standards. A dictionary can only give a brief technical definition of a word. We define right and wrong according to what the Bible says, not the limited definitions crafted by men.

There is no loophole by which we escape the standard of God. A dictionary has a scientifically sterile definition; the Bible is much more expansive. The dictionary focuses what happens physically for fornication to occur; the Bible focuses on what happens in the heart for fornication to occur.

Jesus gave us our highest standard of sexual sin in Matthew 5:28 when he said, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." For Jesus, it was not just about the physical act of sin; it was the mental and spiritual act of sin. The Lord's standard of sexual immorality focused on the person's heart and their intent.

In reading your argument, it appears quite obvious that what you described is a sexual act by merely examining the result. The end game of sexual activity is sexual gratification. In the eyes of God, how you get there is less important than arriving at a place of sin. The touching of one another's genitals while kissing heavily until there is a sexual climax is a sexual act. It is obvious that you are describing the touching of a sexual organ, stimulating it for pleasure, and having a sexual release. That description is a classical physical definition of sex.

In your hypothetical description, you stated there was prolonged and pronounced kissing. I will borrow from the logic

of our previous article you cited:

Scripture says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1). One of the meanings for the Greek word for "touch" means "to press against in such a way as to kindle or catch on fire." So another way to translate this verse would be, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman so that they become sexually aroused."

I can guarantee that a person's thoughts will not be pure in those moments of kissing and touching.

What is also obvious from your description is the intent of the act itself. You looked up the dictionary's definition of sex, and then devised activities that have the same sexual pleasure of sex while avoiding the technical aspects of intercourse. The intentionality of the act is what separates two similar actions from one that is acceptable versus one that is sinful. For example, touching your boyfriend's/girlfriend's genitals would be sin because the touching is for sexual pleasure. By contrast, a nurse touching someone's genitals for a checkup is not sin because of the intent (medicinal analysis).

As believers, we are to honor God; not gratify our fleshly desires. When we try to rationalize questionable actions, we are not abiding by the Spirit of God. We are to control ourselves in a way that is holy and honorable (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). If we ever have doubts as to what is godly or not, we can ask ourselves this question: If Jesus were standing here, would he approve of my actions? The answer to that question will lead us to an answer that upholds God's Word, His Will, and our integrity.

I hope that answers your question.

Nathan Townsie

Restoring the Sacred

The Loss of the Sacred

There are several ways to define modernism. One way is this: modernism was an attempt to remove the sacred from society and to replace it with a mechanistic naturalism. Everything was to be understood and explained in scientific terms.

The late philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade wrote this:

The completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos [that is, the cosmos with the sacred removed] is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit . . . desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies.[\[1\]](#)

Profane, here, is another word for *secular*. It is contrasted with *sacred*. My *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sacred* as “connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.” It is closely related to *sanctified* which means “holy” which means “dedicated or consecrated to God.”[\[2\]](#)

Ours is obviously a secular society. Everything open for public discussion is to be explained with no reference to the sacred; there is no acknowledged connection to God. It seems the only time the sacred makes it into the news is when there is a tragedy and reporters talk about people praying, or when a famous religious person, such as the Pope, dies.

Once upon a time in the West, our society operated as though

God mattered. Now, such views are considered quaint relics of the past which shouldn't be allowed to invade the public square. The late Christopher Reeve in a speech about stem cell research at Yale University said that "our government should not be influenced by any religion when matters of public policy are being debated."[\[3\]](#) Religion is to be a private affair only.

The late theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin, after spending four decades in India, said this about the West:

The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture, and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people.[\[4\]](#)

Why should this matter to us? Among other reasons is the simple unfairness in a democracy of "religious people" not being able to bring *their* worldviews into public debates while the nonreligious can. I can think of two explanations for this idea. First, it's thought that religion necessarily creates unreasonable *bias* whereas irreligion doesn't. Religious belief removes our ability to be objective, it is thought. People who think this way need to catch up with current philosophy! There are no value-free facts, and no perspectives that do not begin with unprovable assumptions.[\[5\]](#)

Second, it's thought that religious biases are likely to be *destructive* because of their "intolerant" character. This is a popular mantra today; it is trotted out with all the authority of unassailable fact. Didn't the events of 9/11 prove it? Responding to the observation that people see those horrible events as illustrating what religious monotheism causes, writer Os Guinness noted that "In the last century, more people were killed by secularist intellectuals, in the name of secularist ideologies, than in all the religious persecutions and repressions in Western history combined."[\[6\]](#) If the twentieth century is a good witness, there is greater danger

from secular powers than from religious ones.

Beyond that, though, is a problem Christians have individually and corporately. When so much of our time is spent in a realm in which our Christian beliefs aren't welcomed, we begin to forget their importance for all of life. So we start thinking from a secular perspective. In addition, we even find it easier to let our Christian beliefs be shaped by non-Christian thinking.

In her latest book, *Total Truth*,^{7} Nancy Pearcey has reminded us of the importance of destroying the divide between the sacred and the secular in our thinking. But it can't stop with our thinking; the sacred needs to be an integral part of our lives. As part of that process it would be good to be reminded of just what we mean by the sacred.

Sacredness

As noted earlier, *sacred* means to be dedicated or devoted to God. It involves a separation of purpose: something is separated from the use of the world for the use of God.

The idea of sacredness is reflected in a number of ways in the various religions of the world. There are holy books and places and festivals. The sacred is reflected in religious architecture. Islamic mosques, for example, are designed to point people to Allah. Muslim writer Hwaa Irfan speaks of "sacred geometry [which] is the science of creating a space, writing or other artwork, which reminds one of the greatness of Allah."^{8} In the past, Christianity too, of course, was conscious of the sacred in its architecture. Medieval era churches were built for the purpose of "signifying the sacred," of reflecting something about God. The furnishings of churches were designed to aid in this focus.

Old Testament

What does the Bible tell us about sacredness or holiness?[{9}](#)
In the Old Testament it refers primarily to God. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” Isaiah said (6:3). In Old Testament times, God showed Himself to be set apart from His created order through such events as Moses being told to remove his shoes before the burning bush because he was standing on holy ground (Ex. 3:5). Later, at Sinai, God called Moses up onto a mountain to teach him His laws, far away from the people signifying His separateness from a fallen world (Ex. 19). His separation from unclean things was reflected also through His laws (e.g., Lev. 11:43, 44). Anyone who would approach God, who would “ascend His holy hill,” according to the Psalmist, must have “clean hands and a pure heart” (24:4).

The word *holy* was applied to other things that were separated by God, such as the nation of Israel (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 20:26), the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23), the tabernacle with both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (Ex. 26:33), and the various feasts and special observations, such as the Day of Atonement (Ex. 30:10). This even extended to objects used for worship. For example, there was special incense that was too holy to be used by people for themselves (Ex. 30:37). In the Old Testament, then, we find God using things and events to teach His people about His holy nature.

New Testament

What do we find in the New Testament? Again, the primary reference is to God. All three members of the Trinity are said to be holy. Peter repeated God’s admonition recorded in Lev. 11:44—“Be holy because I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). He called Jesus “the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:69). And, of course, the Spirit is called the Holy Spirit (e.g., Lk. 2:26).

Whereas in the Old Testament, God’s separateness from creation and the unclean was the emphasis, in the New Testament the moral dimension comes to the fore (although the moral wasn’t

absent from the Old Testament). In the Old Testament the concern is more with external matters; in the New Testament the focus is on the internal. The writer of Hebrews says we were “made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10). This doesn’t mean we’ve fully “arrived” in our personal sanctification. Paul says we’re to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). The shift in emphasis between Testaments doesn’t indicate a change in the meaning of holiness or its importance. For example, God’s people are called saints—holy ones or sanctified ones—in both Testaments (e.g., Ps. 34:9; Acts 9:13). However, in the Old Testament times, God used external matters, which could be seen, to teach about the inward change He desired.

Does this mean that we no longer think about events and physical things as holy as in the Old Testament? Certainly not in the same way Old Testament saints did. We no longer have the Temple and the sacrificial system and the Aaronic priesthood. All things are God’s, and all things are to be offered up to Him with a pure heart. There should be no sacred/secular split in the sense that some things are under God’s jurisdiction and some aren’t. However, we might find that, just like the Israelites, certain items or observances might help in directing us to God or reminding us of His character.

Secularism—The Loss of the Sacred

Contrasted with *sacred* is the idea of *secular*. The root of the word “secular” is interesting. It comes from a Latin word that means “time.” James Hitchcock says “to call someone secular means that he is completely time-bound, totally a child of his age, a creature of history, with no vision of eternity. Unable to see anything in the perspective of eternity, he cannot believe that God exists or acts in human affairs.”^{10} A

secular society, then, is one which is tied to time, to the temporal, with no reference to the eternal, to God.

We shouldn't think that there was no distinction between the sacred and the secular in the West until modern times. In the Medieval era, there was secular music and poetry. However, there was an increasing turn to the secular following the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century writers such as Voltaire were openly espousing secularism. If religion was the cause of such terrible things as the wars of the sixteenth century, it should be removed from the public square.

Over time, secularism gradually encroached on almost all areas of human life. In the university in the nineteenth century, a movement began to remove religion from its central place in education and segregate it to its own department. In the workplace, *efficiency* became a watchword; because religion could disrupt the workplace, it was to be left at home. By the twentieth century buildings and art and law and . . . well, you name it; all areas of human life were now to be thought of in secular terms and developed according to the methods of science. Life would be much improved, it was thought, if we were freed from the narrowness of religion to make of ourselves what we would. Humanism was the fundamental worldview, and secular humanism at that. The name given to this era was "modernism."

What has this gotten us as a society? We're free to construct our reality any way we wish now that God is supposedly dead. But what have we done with our freedom? Henry Grunwald, former ambassador to Austria and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc. said this:

Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or

perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism. We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed—the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing.[\[11\]](#)

What the Loss of the Sacred Means for Us

Life in a secular world

What does it mean to live in a secular society? How does it color our Christian experience? How does it affect the way we make decisions? The way we spend our money and time? The way we relate to people?

In 1998, Craig Gay published a book titled *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As if God Doesn't Exist*.[\[12\]](#) In the introduction, he addresses the question why there needs to be another book on modernism. He gives a couple of reasons. First, he says, is the possibility of unfruitfulness. He points to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew as a biblical example. Could any ineffectiveness on our part or the part of our churches be traced back to accommodation to the secular mind? Could our many church programs and strategies be found wanting because we are using modern methods which run counter to the ways of God? Our private lives have become divided: Monday through Friday are for money-making endeavors; Saturday is for working around the house or going to the lake; Sunday is for religion. We live bifurcated lives.

Second is “the threat of apostasy and spiritual death.” Think of the proverbial frog in the pot of water slowly coming to a boil, and then think about how easy it is to adopt the notion that “you only go around once” and the modernistic solution of getting all the “toys” we can *while* we can . . . and gradually

not only *look* like the world but become card-carrying members of it.

The sacred brought down to the secular

The late Francis Schaeffer taught many of us the meaning and significance of “secular humanism,” and, as a result of such teaching, evangelicals have taken on the project of integrating the sacred and the secular in more and more areas of their lives. Much of this has been good. Determining to let one’s Christian beliefs inform all aspects of life is hard in itself; in a secular culture that doesn’t care for such things, it’s a major challenge. As noted earlier, it is an uphill battle living as a Christian in our secular society, so one should be cautious about criticizing the sincere efforts of fellow believers.

In my opinion, however, some or many of us have unconsciously pulled a “switcheroo.” In our efforts to tear down the divide between sacred and secular, we have been guilty to a significant extent of bringing the sacred down to the secular rather than lifting all of life up to the secular, as it were. We live so much of our lives in the “lower story” as Nancy Pearcey calls it (following Schaeffer) that we have simply baptized as Christian attitudes and ways of life that are questionable. We’ve secularized the sacred rather than vice versa.

Ask yourself this: Besides things internal to you—attitudes, beliefs, etc.—what externals in your life clearly reflect the divine? How does the sacred color your life? What habits of life, objects or tools, what signifiers of the sacred, are part of your life?

Restoring the Sacred, *Not* the Sacred-

Secular Split

In so far as this describes us, we need to make the conscious decision to bring about change. The first order of business is to re-acknowledge the sacredness of God. Then we must recognize that we are sanctified, set apart. We are to be drawn up to God, and one significant area in which this should be seen is in worship. Think of worship as the sanctified being drawn up to the Sanctifier. In another place I wrote this:

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. [\[13\]](#)

Two thoughts to add which might seem contradictory at first. In response to the secularization of our society, it is our responsibility to bring God back into all the affairs of our lives, even the mundane. In our *private* lives that will be easier to do than in our *public* lives simply because we don't set all the rules for the latter. For example, a person working for a financial institution probably won't be able to insist that the boss leads the office in prayer before work each morning. However, there *are* ways we can bring a Christian view of the world and godly morality into the workplace. We want God to be over the full sweep of our lives such that we don't have a brick wall dividing our lives in two.

Along with that, however, we might find it helpful to bring into our lives some kinds of signifiers of the sacred, some kinds of objects or places or routines or *something* that will provide reminders to us that the world we see isn't all there is. Christians have used symbols for ages to remind them of

the “otherness” of God. Art has made a big comeback in recent decades as a means of portraying truths about God and a Christian view of life and the world. Such things aren’t prescribed in Scripture. What *is* prescribed, of course, is the rejection of idolatry. Therefore, anything we use as an aid must remain just that—an aid, not the object of our faith.

Thomas Molnar argues that a strong Christian belief in the supernatural needs worship symbols such as prayer, ritual, a sense of the sacred community, sincere piety, and the *élan* (enthusiastic energy) of the clergy.”[\[14\]](#) He believes that the only way the church can remain strong in a pagan environment is to “remain unquestionably loyal” to both the intellectual component—doctrine—and the sacred component which employs symbolic forms.[\[15\]](#) The intellectual component gives us an understanding of our faith and our world. By being renewed, it enables us to “test and approve what God’s will is” (Rom. 12:2). The symbolic component can help us focus on and learn about God. Things like visual aids, postures, particular times set aside for a focus on God, along with Bible reading and prayer, can be very beneficial, as long as they don’t lead to idolatry or a diminished or altered view of God.

We don’t have the law with all its stipulations about the Temple and its furnishings, sacrifices, and special feasts. In my opinion, however, to simply set all such things aside *because* they aren’t required by law is short-sighted. Human nature hasn’t changed; if sacred signifiers were helpful to the Israelites, maybe they would be to us, too.

To give people a list of things to do that goes beyond clear scriptural exhortation to such practices as prayer, learning God’s Word, gathering together as a body, and participating in the sacraments or ordinances would be to overstep our boundaries. The most I can do, then, is ask you think about it. Consider how you can restore a clear sense of the sacred in your life. Not just any sacredness *per se*, of course, but a sense of the presence of the One who is truly sacred and of

the significance of the sacred for how you live.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 13.
2. *The Pop-up New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Selectsoft Publishing, 1992.
3. Christopher Reeve, "Stem Cells and Public Policy" Yale University, April 3, 2003. Accessed from www.yale.edu/opa/v31.n25/story7.html on 4/6/2005. The offending statement was reported in Mitch Horowitz, "Ambassador of the Miraculous" on Horowitz' Web site at www.mitchhorowitz.com/christopher-reeve.html (Accessed 4/6/2005).
4. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 31.
5. Thomas Kuhn got the ball rolling with respect to science, the supposed bastion of objectivity, with his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970; first published in 1962). For philosophical treatments see Arthur F. Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986); and Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002).
6. Mary A. Jacobs, "Q&A With Os Guinness: Standing in Defense of 'One True God'," *Dallas Morning News*, March 26, 2005.
7. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004).
8. Hwaa Irfan, "Sacred Geometry of Islamic Mosques," Islamonline.net
www.islamonline.net/English/Science/2002/07/article02.shtml,

accessed 4/7/2005.

9. I am indebted for much of what follows to Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), s.v., "Holiness."

10. James Hitchcock, *What Is Secular Humanism? Why Humanism Became Secular, and How It Is Changing Our World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 10-11. I highly recommend this book for a history of secular humanism through the 1970s.

11. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75, quoted in Garber, 54.

12. Craig Gay, *The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As if God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

13. Rick Wade, "Christianity: The True Humanism" Probe Ministries, 2000. Available on the Web at www.probe.org/christianity-the-true-humanism/.

14. Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 79.

15. Molnar, 81.

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