The Need to Read: G. K. Chesterton

Continuing in 'The Need to Read' series, Todd Kappelman examines the writings of G.K. Chesterton, a writer admired by both C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer.

A Christian for the Twentieth Century

This article is another installment in our continuing *Need to Read* series. The purpose of the series is to introduce people to authors they might enjoy and to offer some help by way of navigating through the themes developed in the works written by these individuals. It is regrettable that many people who enjoy C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer neglect the writings of Gilbert Keith, or G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a man who was admired by both Lewis and Schaeffer. George Bernard Shaw called him a "colossal genius" and Pope Pius XI called him "a devoted son of the Holy Church and a gifted defender of the faith."{1}

Until his death at the age of seventy-two, Chesterton was a dominant figure in England and a staunch defender of the faith, and Christian orthodoxy, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Roman Catholic church. In addition to nearly one hundred books, he wrote for over seventy-five British periodicals and fifty American publications. He wrote literary criticism, religious and philosophical argumentation, biographies, plays, poetry, nonsense verse, detective stories, novels, short stories, and economic, political, and social commentaries.{2}

An excellent introduction to Chesterton can be found in a book titled *Orthodoxy*, published in the United States in 1908, and affectionately dedicated to his mother. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton gives an apologetic defense of his Christian faith.

He believed this defense was necessary to answer some of the criticism directed at his previous book, *Heretics*.{3}

Before Schaeffer wrote *Escape From Reason*, Chesterton titled the third chapter of *Orthodoxy* "The Suicide of Thought," a chronicle of the demise of modern man.

Chesterton believed that what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. "Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert, is exactly the part he ought to doubt¾himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason."{4}

Chesterton believed that man's autonomy had been elevated beyond the reason of God; each individual has become his or her own master. The sages can see no answer to the problem of religion, but that is not the trouble with modern sages. Modern man, and his sages, said Chesterton, cannot even see the riddle.

Modern men, he believed, had become like small children who are so stupid that they do not even object to obvious philosophical contradictions.{5} Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer after him, understood that religion in the twentieth century would become very philosophical even for the average man. Chesterton reminds us that Christians would be living in a time when many of their friends, family, and neighbors, as well as their co-workers and spouses, would no longer be living as though man had to be reasonable. Later Francis Schaffer would call this same cultural phenomenon the age of *non-reason*.

Chesterton was very proud of being a Roman Catholic, and frequently defended his denomination as much as he did the

faith in general. He was a Roman Catholic who was also deeply concerned about the universal church and will probably be enjoyed by most people who like C. S. Lewis and a "Mere Christianity" type of approach to the faith.

Chesterton and a Reasonable Christianity

In his book *The Everlasting Man* one can find the mature Chesterton. It was written in 1925 just three years after the Roman Catholic church had received him at the age of almost fifty. In this book Chesterton employs a style of argumentation called the *reductio ad absurdum*.{6} He assumes some of the claims of rationalists and agnostics to show the absurdity of their point of view. He begins with a demonstration that if man is treated as a mere animal the result would not only be ridiculous, but the world would not exist in its present state. Men do not really act as though there is nothing special and significant about human beings. They act as though man is unique and that he is the most superior and crowning achievement in the known universe.

In a section titled "The Riddles of the Gospel" Chesterton attempts to show what it would be like if an individual were to approach the Gospels and really confront the Christ of history who is presented there. He would not find a Christ who looks like other moral teachers. The Christ presented in the New Testament is not dull or insipid, He is dynamic and unparalleled in history. The Christ of the Gospels is full of perplexities and paradoxes.

The *freethinker* and many nonbelievers, said Chesterton, object to the apparent contradictions found in the Bible, especially as it pertains to Christ. Jesus admonished His followers to turn the other cheek and take no thought for tomorrow. However, He did not turn the other cheek with respect to the money changers in the Temple and was constantly warning people to prepare for the future. Likewise, Christ's view of the marriage bond is unique and unparalleled in history. Jews,

Romans, and Greeks did not believe or even understand enough to disbelieve the mystical idea that the man and the woman had become one sacramental substance in the matrimonial union.{7} Christ's view of marriage is neither a product of His culture or even a logical development from the time period. It is an utterly strange and wonderful teaching which bears the stigma of being from another world.

Before C. S. Lewis had formulated his observations that Christ is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord, Chesterton had laid out the very same problem. The Christ of the New Testament, said Chesterton, is not a mere mythical figure. He cannot be merely another ethical teacher or even a good man; these options are not open to anyone who would honestly consider the Christ who is encountered in the Scriptures. The question remains, Who is Christ?

In *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton maintains that each of the aforementioned explanations are singularly inadequate. The belief that Christ was a delusional lunatic, or even a good teacher, suggests something of the mystery which they miss.{8} There must be something to a person who is so mysterious and confusing that he has inspired as much controversy as Christ.

Christ is who He said He was and is infinitely more mysterious than the finite human mind can fully comprehend. In his writings G. K. Chesterton demonstrates that he is a Christian writer who possessed those rare and necessary gifts which allow difficult theological and philosophical problems to be understood and discussed by the average man.

Chesterton's Reflections on America

Chesterton's writings cover theological, philosophical, social, political, and economic trends simultaneously with particular attention to a Christian worldview. In the two works *What I Saw In America* and *Sidelights,* Chesterton offers the reader his reflections on America during the early part of

the twentieth century.

On January 10, 1921 Chesterton and his wife Frances began a three month tour of America. Their first stop was in New York City. Here Chesterton examined the lights of Broadway and proclaimed: "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."{9} This begins the great man's observations and impressions of the New World, skyscrapers, rural America, Washington politics, and the nation's spiritual condition.

Some of the central themes that emerge in *Sidelights*, and especially in *What I Saw In America,* are Chesterton's views of the effects of rationalism, commercialism, and the general spiritual poverty of many Americans. Although he is painting with extremely large brush strokes, there is much that can be learned about who we were at the early part of the twentieth century and how we became what we are today.

Chesterton was able to see both sides of the American experiment: the dream as well as the nightmare. He appears to dwell on the down side to balance the kind of utopian optimism that frequently blinds Americans to the true realities of their living conditions. Chesterton said that his first impression of America was of something enormous and rather unnatural, and was tempered gradually by his experience of kindness among the people. Additionally, and with all sincerity, he added that there was something unearthly about the vast system which seemed to be a kind of wandering in search of an ideal utopia of the future. He said "the march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. [T]he latest modern sensation is a book," referring here to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, "written to show how wretched it is to live there."{10}

Chesterton thought about America frequently and she would be one of his favorite subjects for almost twenty-five years

after his first visit. His frequent discussion about drinking and smoking may strike many readers as peripheral, a kind of antiquated masculine fun. But these matters were crucial to Chesterton's view of a complete life and for him represented a misguided moralism in the United States. The puritanical incongruity of Americans would serve Chesterton as a point of departure for all of his thinking about the New World.

Chesterton was an Englishman and is in a position to offer criticism from the point of view of a foreigner without the difficulties of a language barrier. Although he understood that his native England and Europe at large were going through the same philosophical and social changes, it is the speed at which America was rushing to embrace all things new that alarmed him. In *What I Saw in America* one will really discover what Chesterton found alarming and dangerous about our country in the early twentieth century.

Chesterton was confronted with prohibition on both of his trips to America and was deeply concerned with its effects on both Christian and secular aspects of society. He never tired of the extended metaphor of prohibition as the condition of religion in the United States. Making a comparison between the Carrie Nation style of saloon smashing prohibition and the Nonconformists in his native England, Chesterton believed that both groups suffered from an astoundingly fixed and immovable notion of the nature of Christianity.{11}

Chesterton saw in this legalistic stance toward liquor an indicator of what was truly wrong Protestant religion in America. He said it is a pretty safe bet that if any popular American author has mentioned religion and morality at the beginning of a paragraph, he will at least mention liquor before the end of it. To men of different creeds and cultures the whole idea would be staggering.{12} The natural result was that the man on the street frequently equated Christianity with a strong stance against drinking, smoking, and gambling. As a consequence, salvation has as much to do with abstinence

as it does with regeneration.

The Victorian hypocrisy was that there were family prayers and the form of religion, but only so far as it was a cover-up for an anti-traditionalist mentality. The average Christian, believed Chesterton, was professing his religion on the one hand and embracing a pervasive and destructive industrial commercialism on the other.{13} The astute observation of Chesterton was of a man witnessing a strange new phenomenon, Christians reconciling their prosperity with their faith.

In spite of a Great Depression, one World War that would soon lead to another, and numerous social injustices, the twentieth century in the early thirties was still a time when personal ownership of cars, regular vacations, and numerous other opportunities were increasingly available to more Americans. This was the true formation of the American dream, and it would be closely tied to materialism in the most crass form.

Chesterton was vindicated in his harsh observations about America on several fronts. First, there was then and still remains a large segment of the Christian population that believes Christian faith to be little more than a list of prohibitions. It is not that there are not things Christians should and should not participate in, rather it is the stifling of the Christian imagination with respect to the many ways which faith can manifest itself. For Chesterton the belief that good Christians do not drink would be tantamount to saying that one must wear a tie on Sunday morning to be in good standing in the faith. In the same way that some consider the latter statement to be ridiculous it was puzzling to Chesterton, as well as C. S. Lewis, why some American Christians failed to recognize the same in the former statement.

As for the American dream, Chesterton’s words are still a sober warning for the unique way in which Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, have largely become a nation of

consumers. We may read his words during the early part of the twentieth century as warnings not to repeat the same mistakes now.

The Unreasonableness of Modern Man

Chesterton was a prolific journalist whose books and contributions to over one hundred American and British journals and periodicals continue to be read by Christians throughout the world. The need to return to this seminal thinker can be seen in the relevance some of his shorter works still have today.

In the *T. P. Weekly* in 1910, Chesterton wrote a small piece titled *What is Right with the World?* In it he acknowledges the fact that the world does not appear to be getting very much better in any vital aspects and that this fact could hardly be disputed.{14} However, Chesterton does not leave the reader with the pessimistic observation that the world is not a very nice place. He adds that the only thing that is right with the world is the world itself. Existence itself as well as man and woman are right inasmuch as they were created right. The fact that so much is wrong did not distress Chesterton; it was merely an occasion

to demonstrate that the world bears the stigma of having been good at one time and now being evil. The blackness of the world, said Chesterton, is not so black if we recognize how and why things are like they are.

At one point in a work titled *The Common Man* Chesterton attempts to show why it is necessary for every individual to have a philosophy. The best reason being that certain horrible things will happen to anyone who does not possess some kind of coherent worldview.{15} Sounding very much like a contemporary Christian apologist, Chesterton said that a man without a philosophy would be doomed to live on the used-up scraps of other men's thought systems.{16}

Chesterton continues to challenge the idea that philosophy is for the few, arguing that most of our modern evils are the result of the want of a good philosophy. Philosophy, he said, was merely thought which had been thoroughly thought through. All men test everything by something. The question is whether the test has ever been tested.{17} One can see in Chesterton the same vigorous call to reflective thinking that Francis Schaffer used fifty years later to call an entire generation of Christians to become more philosophic and begin engaging the culture at a more substantive level.

We have been attempting to make a case for the need to read G. K. Chesterton's works, and have urged those who enjoy C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, or Peter Kreeft to give Chesterton a look. In closing, Chesterton's poem *The Happy Man* from his book *The Wild Night* will serve as a conclusion.

> To teach the grey earth like a child,
> To bid the heavens repent,
> I only ask from Fate the gift
> Of one man well content.
> Him will I find: though when in vain
> I search the feast and mart,
> The fading flowers of liberty,
> The painted masks of art.
> I only find him as the last,
> On one old hill where nod
> Golgotha's ghastly trinity—
> Three persons and one God.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.
2. Hosea 4:6.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.
5. Ibid., 217-224.
6. Ibid., 225-236.
7. Ibid., 261-270.
8. Ibid., 207-208.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.
10. Ibid., 275-290.
11. Ibid., 291-302.
12. Ibid., 211.

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Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of Christianity Ringing True Today

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."{1}

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.{2} Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure.{3} He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of

his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full- fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.{4}

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means "thoughts" in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.{5}

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were "May God never abandon me!"{6}

The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal's apologetics, it's important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn't interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble

and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God's image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

> What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him."{8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.{9}

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about

such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. “The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable,” he says, “that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances.” Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.{10}

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn’t it? But the attitude people take is this:
Just as I doRick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me.{11}

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man’s reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people

exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."{12} Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.{13} The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.{14}

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions.{15} "The two so-called principles of truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions."{16} Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty{17}, often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."{18} In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is "the `intuitive' mind" rather than "the `geometrical' (calculating, reasoning) mind."{19} For example, we know when we aren't dreaming. But we can't prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.{20} Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. "If natural things are beyond [reason]," Pascal said, "what are we to say about supernatural things?"{21}

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?{22} Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our

will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15{23}, Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself ("hides" in the sense that He doesn't speak}. One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, "God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will." God wants to "humble [our] pride."{24}

But God doesn't remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. "If there were no obscurity," Pascal says, "man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure."{25}

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. "God is a hidden God," says Pascal, " and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him*."{26} Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

> All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God's existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.{27}

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn't do any good. As Pascal says, "That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty." A person with this knowledge has not "made much progress toward his salvation."{28} What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."{29}

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."{30} "By faith we know he exists," he says.{31} "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."{32} Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."{33}

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."{34}

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.{35} He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."{36} He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

> Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [*sic*] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the *types* of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature.

Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . ." People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn't the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, "it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe," he says, " is the cross." At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: "Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."{43}

The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

> Let us then examine the point and say: "Either God exists, or he does not." But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose,

nor can reason defend your position of choice.{44}

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it's true, while the losses will be insignificant if it's false.{45} If it's true and you have rejected it, you've lost everything. However, if it's false but you have believed it, at least you've led a good life and you haven't lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it's better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You're going to live one way or the other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can't remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?"{46} After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."{47}

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.{48} By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-

century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, Blaise Pascal (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.
6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. Ibid., 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 236.

15. Houston, 58.
16. Ibid., 58.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.
28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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